This Dangerous Game

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Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Alana Bloom, Margot Verger, Freddie Lounds (male version), Francis Dolarhyde, Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Dr. Frederick Chilton, Bedelia Du Maurier, Franklyn Froideveaux, Reba McClane
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Victorian, Canon-Typical Violence, Case Fic, Slow Build, Hurt/Comfort, Hannibal is Hannibal, Possessive Hannibal, Protective Hannibal, Mentor/Protégé, Manipulation, Sickfic, Sassy Will Graham, Resolved Sexual Tension, Loss of Virginity, Rimming, Anal Sex, Anal Fingering, Coming Untouched, Developing Relationship, Top Hannibal, Top Will, Bottom Hannibal, Bottom Will, Secret/Hidden Relationship, Tenderness, Falling In Love, Fanart
Language:	English
Collections:	Fresh Meat Friday, BestOfTheBestFanfics, AllFaves, A Whisper to the Dark Side, My Heart Adores, Izanami's Pile of Murder Husbands' Fics, So Much Talent on AO3, Fine Fanfic, Faves and must-reads, OhmyOhmy, Hannibal And Will, Completed - Done reading (Niiv), My fav long ass slash storys, Pat's fave fanfics of all time, Hannibal Hits, Kade's Fics that just HIT DIFFERENT, Don't Forget These Fics, Why I ❤️ ao3, Fics That I Like 🥰🤩⭐, Emmas_Recs, super_fics, Hannibal, MyAO3Faves, definite keepers, My Escapism List, Hannigram Bonanza, fantastic_fics, Queer Characters Collection, The Special Collection, My Personal Favorites, Reread And Revisit, B is for Brilliant, Carries Bookshelf, Fanfic Is My Life, My Bookshelf, AO3 Amazing, FantasticFicAndWhereToFindIt, sleep stealing fics
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This Dangerous Game

by MissDisoriental

Summary

"*Keep your wits about you Inspector Graham – I rather fear you are going to need them*."

London 1888. In order to catch the notorious serial killer known as Jack the Ripper, Will Graham must seek the insights of Dr Hannibal Lecter.

Now with beautiful fanart! Huge thanks to azrabel, carrionofmyywaywardwatson, cervolina, cherry, CrazyInL0v3, graham_cracker, marlahanni, nnova, Petriey and tictactoes.

Podfic available here
Translations: Chinese and Russian

Notes

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This fic follows the tradition of using real life events as a back-drop to tell a fictional story, so while some deviations are inevitable I'll be keeping to historical facts as far as possible. However some dates and chronology have been changed; from the outset this includes shifting the public outrage towards the police back by a couple of months, which in real life didn't begin until later in the year.

With some extremely obvious exceptions, all quoted press coverage is genuine material from 1888. Some of these sources provide disturbing details, so if this would distress you then please proceed with caution.

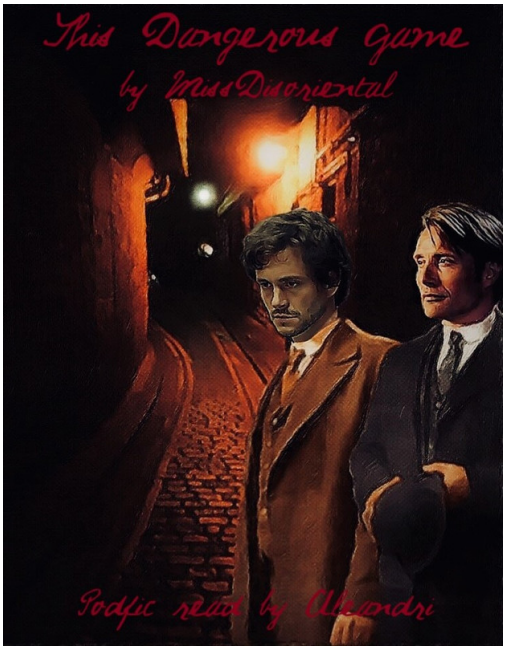
The Whitechapel murders happened over a century ago and have since taken on an almost mythic, folkloreish aspect (including everything from video games and comic books, to novels, action figures, and a 'Jack the Ripper Terror Walk' in London) meaning it's sometimes easy to disassociate from how awful these crimes really were. For that reason, and because it felt disrespectful to portray the actual victims within the context of a fanfic, the women in this story have different names and physical descriptions to their real-life counterparts. Likewise all the Scotland Yard detectives are fictitious.

Okay, so now I've scared most people off. Everyone else – let's get going!

- Translation into Русский available: Опасная игра by Setchi

Chapter 1

This Dangerous Game
by MissDisoriental


This Dangerous Game
by MissDisoriental
Podfic read by Alexandri

THIS DANGEROUS GAME
London, 1888

Huge thanks to the wonderful CrazyInL0v3, Petriey and marlahanni for the beautiful cover art.

28 September 1888.

Extract from a Wanted Poster produced and displayed by the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee.

GHASTLY MURDER IN THE EAST END

Another murder of a character even more diabolical than that perpetrated in Back's Row, on Friday week, was discovered in the same neighbourhood on Saturday morning. At about six o'clock a woman was found lying a back yard at the foot of a passage leading to a lodging house in Old Brown's Lane, Spitalfields…A lodger named Davis was going down to work at the time mentioned and found the woman lying on her back close to the flight of steps leading into the yard. Her throat was cut in a fearful manner. The woman's body had been completely ripped open…

30 September 1888

Extract from *Reynolds Newspaper*.

WHERE ARE THE POLICE?

The police have exhibited an incapacity that amounts to imbecility in all their methods: and whether it is the outcome of divided counsels in high quarters or sheer incompetence, the result is the same, and a brutal murderer is given what seems absolute impunity to practise his horrid crimes…The police have failed miserably. They have obtained grace again and again from a horror-stricken public; and almost in so many words they have dared the human fiend of Whitechapel to try his hand once more…and with all their assurances he is as free as ever to pursue his hellish work, and may pursue it periodically, for aught the police can do, for years to come…

02 October 1888

Extract from *The Tattle Crime.*

OUTSIDE HELP SOUGHT AS SCOTLAND YARD ADMITS DEFEAT

By Freddy Lounds

After a succession of appalling and lamentable blunders – faithfully recorded in these pages with strict adherence to the facts – Scotland Yard have bowed to the force of public and civic outrage and sought outside assistance in apprehending the notorious and brutal ruffian

known only as Jack the Ripper. The Tattle Crime can exclusively inform its discerning readers that the Yard have called out to the former Colonies, who were not deaf to the plea, and from which aid has been despatched accordingly in the form of a most Esteemed Expert. Mr Will Graham, late of the Baltimore City Police Force where he held the office of Inspector, is reputed to be of great acuteness in solving such fiendish outrages as these and is due to arrive in London this very week to bestow the benefit of his insight upon our overpowered constabulary. However, in a sensational twist to this darkest of tales, The Tattle Crime has learned that Mr Graham may not be quite the immaculate and upstanding official he is being represented as – and was in fact obliged to leave American shores following a series of highly questionable events…

03 October 1888

Extract from correspondence between Superintendent J. Crawford (London Metropolitan Police, Scotland Yard, London) and Doctor J. Price (St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London).

Dear Jim, I trust you got my previous letter? Please come as soon as you can. Mr Graham has not even arrived in London yet, but has sent another rather impertinent message insisting on something he is referring to as a 'medical profile.' I am not entirely sure what he means by it, but it seems imprudent to dismiss it out of hand; and considering he has come so far I suppose we must extend him every courtesy. Of course I can think of no one better suited for the task than yourself. Please bring Mr Zeller with you, or any other assistant of your choice…

04 October 1888

Extract from correspondence between Commissioner K. Purnell (Baltimore Police Department, Maryland) and Superintendent J. Crawford.

Well, Jack, let us hope that this situation remains as mutually beneficial as myself and your superior officer trusted for. I suppose Mr Graham has arrived with you by now? By this time you will have been informed about the reasons why I was so little sorry to see him go; and I shall not try and deceive such an esteemed peer as yourself by pretending otherwise. Nevertheless his reputation precedes him – and notwithstanding the deeply unfortunate circumstances under which he leaves the United States, if there is anyone capable of assisting you in apprehending the perpetrator of these terrible crimes in which London finds herself ensnared, then that person is undoubtedly Will Graham…

*****

Superintendent Jack Crawford (six foot one inch; stern, impassive face; impatient manner; means well but often acts badly) runs his eye over the evening papers before flinging them across his desk in a way that is fretful and miserable and entirely out of character. He's aiming for the wire wastepaper basket but misses by several yards and gives a wince of irritation as the pages go fluttering and spiralling into the air like a mocking pastiche of

confetti. He doesn't pick them up. The newspapers contain thousands of words, but there are several which particularly stand out and are now defiantly parading round in his peripheral vision – even closing his eyes wouldn't be enough to erase them; they may as well be tattooed on his retina. These words are: *police*, *failure* and *defeat*.

Unlike the majority of his colleagues, who are inclined to see the victims as virtually asking for it (on the grounds of all being prostitutes) as well as pretty much dispensable (on the grounds of being female and poverty-stricken), Jack feels genuine grief at the idea of such horrific violence. He's a widower and has no daughters of his own – has no children at all, for that matter – but the conceptual leap isn't particularly great. So the flow of condemnation at the failure to catch the Whitechapel murderer touches him far more acutely than as a mere matter of professional pride. Of course it's demoralizing to be vilified in the press – of course it is: only yesterday *The Tattle Crime* carried an unflattering caricature of him having a blindfold tied around his face by a grinning, leering figure obviously meant to be the Ripper himself; *The Illustrated Police News* published a similar cartoon the day before. But professional pride is one thing, and compassion and humanity are another; and Jack Crawford is an unusual example of a high-ranking official in ample possession of both these things.

On his desk is the correspondence from Commissioner Purnell and this is yet another thing (as if there wasn't already enough) over which Jack is unsettled. He finds the whole concept of Will Graham – of what he is reputed to be able to do; as well as what he is alleged to have actually *done* – to be profoundly troubling. And although he's embarrassed to admit it (the small-mindedness of the sentiment conflicting with the worldly, cosmopolitanism with which he likes to think he's more than unusually endowed) the idea of a foreigner – an American – also displeases him. It would have been preferable to have kept this as a London concern, a *British* concern, but the scheme had been devised between Purnell and Jack's own superior officer; and who is he to tell the Chief Superintendent of Scotland Yard what to do for the best. No doubt it's something the Home Secretary would have been involved with too, or at least be made aware of? Well, yes, of course he's going to be aware – questions have already been raised in Parliament about the failure to apprehend the so-called Ripper. Jack grimaces at the thought of it and runs a tired hand over his face. An *American* though…aren't Americans supposed to be brash and unsophisticated? (Jack doesn't really know; he's never actually met any). Then he sighs heavily and rummages in his desk for the small bottle of brandy that he keeps there; ostensibly 'for medicinal purposes,' but really for moments like this. Of course the reality is that it hardly matters whether Will Graham is brash, or unsophisticated, or both troubled *and* troubling, or all of these things, or none of them; the only thing of any real consequence is whether or not he's *effective*. And God knows it's efficiency that's needed; haven't the newspapers said the same? Hasn't he said the same himself? Because the bottom line is that some unholy madman is tearing innocent women apart on his watch – on the watch of Jack Crawford – and for all intents and purposes, there doesn't seem to be anything that anyone can do to stop him.

*****

Freddy Lounds (five foot ten inches; vivid red hair like a fox's pelt; peering bloodshot eyes and probing ink-stained fingers) is sat at his desk in breeches and shirt sleeves, punching vigorously at a creaking Underwood typewriter as if it's done something to personally offend him. So many deadlines at the moment (*dead*-lines…a possible punning headline in there

somewhere?), and it's in everyone's interests to meet them given that this recent spate of murders have been *sensational* for sales. Simply sensational. Indeed the interest is now international and Freddy, as well as countless newsmen like him, are doughtily determined to keep it that way. At first he'd been somewhat sceptical ("It's only a few dead whores") but gradually the potential was fully realised and now if he could meet the Ripper he'd shake him by the hand. The decency, or otherwise, of this sentiment doesn't occur to him, but even if it did he wouldn't let himself be troubled by it: Freddy doesn't really like women (not that he's particularly fond of men either) – an antipathy which appears to be entirely mutual. In this respect it's not always clear from whom the aversion between Freddy (on one side) and humankind (on the other) has its origins: who fired the first shot, as it were. Like an eternal interpersonal game of chicken-and-egg.

Of course until the Ripper is obliging enough to deliver up a new dead prostitute then Freddy needs to find other ways to keep the case bubbling and simmering in the public eye. Lambasting the police has proven a convenient means of doing this, and the invective against Superintendent Crawford and co. has grown more vicious and accusatory in direct proportion to the spaces of time between each new murder. In a purely logical, pragmatic sense – and Freddy is nothing if not pragmatic – then the fact this type of killer is entirely unprecedented means the standard means of criminal investigation can't reasonably be expected to be up to the task of catching him. But then in turn (which is also pragmatic) this is the police's problem rather than Freddy's.

Freddy Lounds smiles to himself and takes a sip of his coffee, which he has stingingly black and bitter, then flags down the office's errand boy who happens to be walking past his desk. "Take these for me, would you Charlie?" he says. "Ocean Postage, mind you – they're to go abroad."

"Sir," replies the boy. He glances down to where Freddy is gesturing and sees a packet of letters next to the typewriter: most, but not all, of which are addressed to the headquarters of the Baltimore City Police.

*****

Charlotte Tate (five foot four inches; wavy blonde hair the colour of pale straw; still pretty but increasingly wan and careworn) is trying to read the newspaper headlines, her lips moving very slightly as she stumbles through the unfamiliar words. The factory girls, trudging past in their print cotton dresses and neat bonnets, look askance at her tawdry attire (Bracelets! A boa!), her uncovered head (No *hat*!), and exchange knowing looks. These looks are seasoned with just the right amount of contempt (Oh, shocking! Shameful!), but Charlotte learnt to stop paying attention a long time ago. She doesn't even envy them anymore; for all that their neat little bonnets signal respectability, and that the cotton frocks are stitched together with propriety and decency itself. Who would want to work in a factory? It's the most deplorable type of drudgery: long hours, low wages; an exhausting, miserable life for next to no money. Hazardous too. There are constant stories of workers maimed and killed courtesy of faulty machinery and perilous conditions, everyone knows about them – the endless parade of blind seamstresses, and crippled textile workers, and matchmakers disfigured with phosphorous jaw. Charlotte is not miserable (at least not most of the time) and because she is young and clinging onto prettiness then the money is in reasonably ready

supply: life, while not exactly *kind* to her, has at least been economical in its cruelty. That is not to say she wouldn't prefer to do something else of course, given the choice. But what else is there to do? There really is very little else. Not when you are a woman, at any rate.

Charlotte knows that the screaming message in the blocky black newspaper headlines is an important one; but somehow she's not quite willing to connect it with herself, because she doesn't recognise her own image in the lurid descriptions of *whores*, *harlots*, and *daughters of vice*. A man from the Baptist society shouted that at her once: just there in the street, right in front of everyone. Some people laughed, and some looked outraged, and one or two even looked sympathetic, but it wasn't enough to make anyone intervene on her behalf. He was wearing a shiny black suit that resembled a beetle's carapace: a long, skittering beetle with legs and arms and religious tracts, calling her wicked names like 'slut' and 'Jezebel' until his face grew red and flecks of spittle flew out of his mouth. Charlotte didn't say a word the entire time, but if she had she would have told him that she hadn't planned this life, or wanted it. She would have told him how she was married once and that that the usual clichés applied just as well to her as to anyone else – how they were 'poor but respectable' and 'young and in love' and how they 'lived decently but kept within their means.' She could have told him – or anyone, if they'd troubled to ask – about how excited and happy they were to start their married life (because London was the pinnacle of an Empire on which the sun was alleged to never set and surely only good things could happen in such a place, especially to a couple that loved so well and so sincerely?); but how her husband had been killed in a factory accident, and how the money ran out, and that it was ultimately either die on the street or earn a living from it. She still carries a cameo of her husband: a little piece of miniature portraiture, small enough to hang in a doll's house, which is tucked inside a tortoiseshell clasp and swings round her neck on the days she's not working. The necklace is not there today.

He had really seemed to hate her, that beetly Baptist man, although he didn't appear to care about the men who made the whole profession possible. At least if he did he never mentioned them. The newspapers, on the other hand, have the opposite concern. They don't really care about the women at all; they are more preoccupied with the man. This unknown man, this 'Jack the Ripper,' who is killing prostitutes – even though the latter don't appear to signify beyond the fact that they were once alive, and now they are not. They are like supporting actresses in someone else's drama. Charlotte doesn't notice this as either a good or a bad thing: it just is.

"Lottie!" says a voice, "Lottie! Over here!" And Charlotte turns round to see another girl, Emma – another Daughter of Vice, another Fallen Woman – with whom she used to share lodgings in the past and, in the present, occasionally shares a corner of the street. Grimly they confer over the most recent murder. The term 'Jack the Ripper' is already common currency: everyone knows who he is. And yet no one has any idea. Isn't that odd?

"London's a big place," says Charlotte, because it's true and it is. "What are the odds of running into him?"

"No odds at all," replies Emma. And maybe they believe this, and maybe they don't; but it's easier to frame it this way because what other choice do they have? "I had to go out last

night," adds the latter, as if to confirm it. "My landlady was screaming for the rent. Said she'd throw me out if I couldn't pay her today. She'd do it too, the hard-faced old bitch."

"But she won't…will she Em? You got your money?"

"That I did." She takes a grimy paper envelope from her reticule to show to Charlotte and together they examine the copper coins inside; an embarrassment of riches. "They have eclairs in the pastry shop down Fairfax Road," Emma adds. "I saw them this morning. We could treat ourselves."

So the two of them links arms and proceed down the middle of the pavement, laughing gaily at nothing and ignoring the disapproving looks from the passers-by. In several decades time, psychologists will coin the term 'cognitive dissonance' to account for such seemingly irrational behaviour: a coping strategy for dealing with fear and inconsistency, and not at all uncommon amongst the troubled and traumatized. Although this insight will come far too late to help Charlotte or Emma, or anyone else like them.

*****

As the girls pass down the street their laughter drifts in through the window of Inspector Will Graham (late of the Baltimore City Police Force, currently of Camden Place, London; five foot nine inches; brown hair and blue eyes), who glances up and then smiles in spite of himself, because it's so long since he heard genuine, unaffected laughter that was neither sardonic or mocking and there's something deeply appealing in it. Not that he's much given to laughing like that himself (he doesn't even try and remember when the last occasion was, because frankly it's an impossible task) but he can still appreciate it in others. It's a bit like enjoying music whilst being unable to play an instrument yourself.

Will has the same newspapers on his desk but is trying very hard not to look at them; partly because they are extraordinarily depressing, but also because one of them has a large picture of himself on the front and the sight of his own image always makes him writhe in spasms of acute embarrassment. Instead he's preoccupied with trying to compose a letter back home, although it's proving an arduous task and the words won't come. In fact in the past ten minutes he's only managed two – *Dear Father* – which in the grand scheme of letter writing feels singularly unimpressive. It's not even as if his father is particularly dear, but the grudging old bastard is going to expect communication of some kind. And besides, Will doesn't have anyone else to write to. He glances down again at the two lone words, which almost seem to be mocking him in their insincerity. *Dear Father: who is in fact not dear*.

Will spins the pen into the air and neatly catches it one-handed before tucking it behind his ear. Then he pours himself a glass of water from the carafe on his desk, trying to prevaricate for just a *little* bit longer, and catches his reflection in the shiny surface when he places it back down. The face that stares back at him is frustratingly young and fragile looking: all wide-eyed and delicate-boned. He's tried cultivating a beard to give himself a bit of gravitas, but isn't entirely convinced at how successful it's been (and in his gloomier moments is forced to concede that it shows an undeniable and unfortunate tendency towards *fluffiness*). Such youthfulness feels somewhat ironic, considering that if the toils of life are supposed to show on the face – which surely they ought to? – then by rights he should look well and truly fucked. Sighing slightly, he picks up the pen again.

"*The passage over proved remarkably quick; only six days from New York to Liverpool. I have now arrived safely in London and am glad to say that I am already settling into life in a new country*."

The second part is a complete lie but it hardly seems to matter (anyway, Will's skilled at lying when the situation demands it; so therefore intends to start as he means to go on). And it's not as if he ever felt particularly settled in the old country either, so who cares anyway? In order to labour the bullshit point he adds: "*In fact I anticipate being very happy here.*"

"I don't, actually," Will tells the paper sarcastically. "I anticipate being extravagantly and excessively miserable." Then he realises that he's talking to himself – and that this is probably not a good habit to acquire so very early on – and so has a sip of water instead and tries to think of something to write which is suitably safe and dull. What though? He skims his eyes round the room, inadvertently catching sight of the newspaper headlines again (oh God, not *those*) before settling on a stack of playbills that arrived this morning from Astor's theatre and which are enthusiastically advertising a forthcoming lecture series. It's an odd combination: *The Art of Engineering* on Monday, evolutionary biology on Tuesday, and the evening after a presentation from a self-proclaimed 'dare devil' ("Asshole," says Will) who survived diving from the Clifton suspension bridge; for seemingly no better reason than to bore the general public rigid with the re-telling of such lethal stupidity. In this respect, he thinks, the grouping of the last two is highly ironic: *bad luck Mr Darwin – natural selection doesn't win today*. He smirks to himself, then abruptly sighs out loud and reluctantly forces his attention back to the letter. Oh for God's sake, this is ridiculous; it's only a message to his father, why is it so difficult? Perhaps he could describe the morning's dutiful round of sight-seeing? Trafalgar Square and the Horse Guards Parade. He'd taken a walk through St. James's Park afterwards, admiring the Pavilion and the spread of shrubs and foliage, then shared his lunch with a stray dog that came and joined him by the lakeside. Will is fond of dogs although this is likewise something he can't describe to his father, who detests them as dirty scavengers and would never let Will have one in the house. Will is cherishing vague hopes that he may be able to acquire one here, although given the prohibition on pets at every boarding house he enquired at it doesn't seem very likely.

"*I saw St. Paul's cathedral this afternoon. I believe it would have interested you. The architecture is very…*"

He frowns and comes to a halt. Very what? Indicative of humanity's superstition, credulity and pathetic willingness to devolve responsibility to a spectral High Power (in effect: a big bearded man in the sky)? An utter waste of taxpayer's money? A pretentious, swaggering piece of shit?

Carefully he writes: "*very impressive*."

He puts down his pen again and gazes out the window, trying find some inspiration. The building opposite has an enormous streak of coppery-coloured damp down the side that begins at the chimney and runs the entire length of the wall. Look at it too long and it starts to bear an unfortunate resemblance to a urine stain; as if someone's taken a piss down the side. As if it's come down from the heavens themselves. God again? *Dear Father, I am sure you would be enormously diverted by the big streak of celestial piss on the other side of the street*.

Will gives a defiant smirk at the idea of the look on his father's face if he actually did confide this particular insight, then runs his hands through his hair until it stands on end, unpins his collar and rolls up his shirt sleeves; which is probably *terribly* vulgar, but there's no one to see him do it, so (once again) who cares? Not that he would care if there was someone. To compound the point he takes his boots off and flings them into the corner so he can sit there in bare feet, then earnestly tries to think of something to write that the old bastard would actually want to hear.

"*The class structures here are extremely ingrained, almost ludicrously so. In this regard there are certainly things that the Old Country could learn from the egalitarianism of America*."

Not that this is really true either. Maybe blood and birth – good breeding – are of less consequence, but you hardly need to cross the Atlantic to recognize the twin pillars of money and respectability as eternally essential elements of the social contract. Will, who has never acquired money (and never aspired to respectability) feels he is in a good position to judge on these things. Although this is hardly the type of sentiment his father – who is conservative in his politics, conformist in his outlook, and aspirational in his notions of social mobility, despite having a collar of a distinctive blue hue – is going to show any kind of sympathy with. At times Will feels something like guilt for the intense contempt he harbours towards Graham Snr for such mindless submission; to Will, there's nothing commendable or admirable in it – it's simply a form of identifying with the oppressor.

After some thought, he adds a merry little exclamation mark at the end of the sentence (*America!*) to give the impression that this is something over which he and his father, as enlightened, democratic Americans, can share a private joke: sniggering secretly together at the stuffy, narrow-minded English. Not that this cosy confederacy would be *at all* the state of things if his father really was here: they'd have already begun cycling through the usual sequence of chronic, chafing resentment, with Will ultimately regressing into a state of adolescent petulance (the beard has never been a safeguard against this, either) and his father glowering and chewing on his moustache, which always appears as wiry and tufted as a toothbrush, before retreating into a miasma of speechless outrage. Will knows that a good portion of the discord stems from the fact that his father would have liked the type of son with whom he could sip beer and discuss the Baltimore baseball league (as opposed to a son like…him); but also from the fact he resembles his mother, who was likewise wide-eyed and delicate-boned, and that the association is a painful one from his father's point of view. Although whether it's the pain of grief and loss, or the more bitter pall of rage and resentment he's never been able to fully determine, and hardly feels able to ask. They're not on those sort of terms.

Will pauses again, fretfully gnawing on the end of the pen, and allows his eyes to stray away from the letter and roam across the detritus already littering his desk. Lying across the blotter is a note from Jack Crawford curtly requesting him to come to Scotland Yard first thing tomorrow morning. That's it; that's all it says. Nothing about the purpose of the visit, or what's expected of him, or even a few trite yet well-meaning lines about being glad that Will is here…although Will isn't glad he's here, so maybe there's no reason for Jack Crawford to be either? He's still not sure how much they know about him – how much detail Commissioner Purnell went into, the exact extent of the disclosures. That whole incident following the brain fever…God, surely they can't know *everything*? Although really, it

hardly matters whether they know or not – because he's still here regardless and tomorrow is going to be expected to stumble straight back into someone else's nightmare. If he could he'd probably cry, or even scream; but is ultimately afraid to do either because of the sense that if he starts he'll never be able to stop and will be sobbing and screaming every single day for the rest of his life. Of course there's no doubt that the awareness of this is the *true* problem to be avoided; ironic, really, that prevaricating from writing the letter – that the letter itself – is merely playacting for evading the genuine source of distress. But how to even *begin* contemplating such a thing: a problem so huge and horrifying that it's like a living thing; like a second person in the room? He doesn't even have the words to discuss it with himself. If it was written down it would have to be expressed in ellipses, obscured behind a sequence of dots because the enormity of it defies both awareness and articulation: '*The things Will Graham feels are ….*' He only know that he doesn't want to do it – wants to go home, wants to be normal – even though *wanting* isn't relevant, being little more than a form of hopelessness-by-proxy. Then a mournful, childish part of Will wants to proclaim 'I can't *bear* it' but of course he has no choice but to bear it – and has never had a choice, and is never likely to have one – so he says nothing.

"And I'm not going to talk to myself," Will adds (before realizing that this admirable resolution is somewhat undermined in that it does, in fact, entail talking to himself), so he inwardly rolls his eyes and returns to his letter.

"*I have secured very pleasant lodgings*," he writes, "*at a reasonable rate and in a convenient part of the city. The landlady has been very kind to me, and the buildings in the neighborhood are of an extremely striking aspect in the style of…*" He pauses once more, and then replaces his pen on the table. In the style of what? He's never really known all that much about beautiful things.

*****

Dr Hannibal Lecter (currently resident of an exclusive medical practice in Harley Street; previous provenance no-one-quite-knows-where; six foot one inch; dark hair and dark eyes) is also reading the newspapers, giving the occasional wince of distaste as he takes in the details of the latest atrocity in Whitechapel. Admittedly his aversion is very far removed from the kind expressed by 99% of the paper's readership, but to him the sentiment is no less valid. In fact if anything it's more so, because it comes from a place of genuine discernment and intellectual integrity as opposed to blindly bleating moral outrage. Slaughter such as this is almost unbearably ugly to him: brutal, mindless and pointless. Worse than that – artless. Graceless. No virtuosity at all. Hannibal gives a fastidious shudder and allows himself a small sigh at the depressing bestiality and swinishness of the populace in general. Even in a supposedly cosmopolitan and sophisticated city like London, one only need to glance out the window to seem them teeming and floundering like farmyard beasts. Oh yes, and speaking of which…

"Sir," says a voice from outside his study, "I'm sorry to disturb you but Mr Froideveaux is here."

"He is rather early," replies Hannibal in a calm tone that in no way betrays the internal twinge of irritation at the interruption. In fact Mr Froideveaux is inevitably early, in a neurotic,

overanxious way (tedious). Although there is no denying that he has had worst patients (not that he had them for long…as it were), and that to be consistently *late* would be far more objectionable, so he is prepared to tolerate it.

"Shall I show him into the consulting room?"

"If you would be so good," says Hannibal. He refers to his watch and realises he has precisely 12 more minutes, so opts to spend them in a thoughtful examination of the second newspaper. Inspector Will Graham is rather intriguing looking; not least because he is extremely young to be in a position of such responsibility. Either he has some obliging relative who has purchased the influence on his behalf, or Inspector Graham is a perfect *prodigy* of the macabre. On reflection, he believes it is almost certainly the latter. Will Graham looks skittish and ill-at-ease, very far removed from the kind of strutting and swaggering which one would anticipate a privileged upstart to display before onlookers. On the contrary he's refusing to look at the camera, rather studying the floor instead. Not fond of eye contact, then. One would think he didn't really want to be there. And yet there he is nonetheless. How very interesting.

Hannibal, unlike Will, does *not* roll up his shirt sleeves or take off his collar or fling his boots across the room; although he does perform his own personal version, which is to stretch his long legs out in front of him in a manner which is far more nonchalant and casual than his usual custom before steepling his fingers beneath his chin and gazing thoughtfully into space. All the way from America too…how has such a rare plant come to be transplanted so far from its native soil? And into terrain that's so undeniably barren and unpromising? Then he spends a few moments amusing himself with the notion of Inspector Will Graham as an actual plant, and what species it could possibly be. Firstly he cycles through the *droseraceae* – carnivorous plants that scour for stimulus then employ seductive snares to lure their victims in – but ultimately rejects this analogy as too coarse. Too…obvious; more suitable for Hannibal himself, if anything (smirk). A rose, then? *Rosaceae*. Beautiful and fragile-looking, but with a thorny underbelly that snags and tears at the unwary – at anyone who underestimates their potential for savagery. In his previous practice, he encountered a patient with a deep puncture wound acquired from a rose bush: gangrene had occurred, followed by sepsis, and the man lost first his limb, and then his life. An unusual case. Hannibal narrows his eyes, almost imperceptibly, and returns to studying the photograph.

Although he is not generally given to flights of imaginative whimsy, something about Will Graham's sad young face has undeniably caught his attention. It's not compassion exactly (compassion being inconvenient); more like…what? Fascination? *Captivation?* No, not that; not exactly. Perhaps intrigue would be more accurate. He reads the accompanying text for a second time, neatly slicing through the hyperbole to extract the underlying facts that speak to him from the photograph. Young. Lacking in confidence – and yet there's an undeniable air of self-possession in the defiant little tilt of the jaw and the frown line between the delicate eyebrows. He still knows how to hold his own. But what exactly is it that draws such an unlikely specimen (*rosaceae*) into such a relentless, pitiless occupation. What exactly *is* the appeal? Because of course there must be one. Admittedly this is an excessive amount of conjecture to draw from a single grainy, monochrome photograph; but then Hannibal Lecter has always been extraordinarily skilled at seeing things that other people can't; at things it

would not even occur to other people to look for. And so he sees Will Graham, and he wonders.

From beneath the window comes the mournful call of the newsboy: *"Terror in the East End! Read all about it! Ghastly murder in Whitechapel!"* Has there been another one then? Most people would probably migrate towards the window at this point, but Hannibal is not most people so he remains where he is and gazes contemplatively at the view of the city from the confines of his chair. Dusk is beginning to descend, shrouding everything in thickly coagulated shadows that bleed into the fog. The gas in the streetlamps is already being lit; darkness is coming.

"City under siege!" calls the newsboy. *"Read all about it! Fiendish murderer still at large!"*

The 12 minutes are up so Hannibal stands and straightens his coat, permitting himself one final glance at the photograph. Such a sad face. Without fully thinking about it, he briefly touches his fingertip against the features (wide-eyed, delicate-boned) that gaze out from the newspaper. Later on, he will ask himself what compelled him to perform such an action and won't be able to fully say.

"Keep your wits about you Inspector Graham," he tells the picture. "I rather fear you are going to need them."

*****

Tomorrow Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter are going to meet for the first time and their respective worlds are going to tilt. Jack Crawford is going to meet Will Graham, and Will Graham is going to meet Jack Crawford and in doing so discover that there are far worse things about London in the autumn of 1888 than a room with no view and no dogs. Charlotte and Emma are going to meet with Fate (if Fate isn't too stately and solemn a term for two poverty-stricken street women for whom the world cares nothing) and Freddy Lounds and his brother journalists are going to write more newspaper articles and in doing so, without even knowing it, create what commentators in decades hence will describe as the first modern prototype for the concept of a serial killer. The public, in the meantime, are going to buy the newspapers and read the articles and then they will grow outraged; but only because these are the last remaining days before the outrage evolved into outright terror. And then the fog is going to descend again – the worst fog, people will later say, for 30 years – and the shadows will choke across the streets and dark things are going to crawl out of them. None of this has happened yet; but it will. The pieces are assembled on the board – just *so* – and now the game begins.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Hello my lovelies, welcome to Chapter 2. I'm guessing everyone who's read the summary has an idea of what to expect - but just to be clear that from this chapter onwards there'll be references to crime scene violence, both real and fictitious, that some people might find distressing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack Crawford is staring at Will, and Will is gazing back again whilst heroically feigning polite interest and trying to conceal the true extent to which his attention is starting to wander. He's extremely aware of how loud the carriage clock sounds in the background, exaggeratedly heavy on every other beat: tick-*tock*, tick-*tock*. The mechanism is obviously faulty…no doubt it'll break before too much longer (*good*, thinks Will; *Godspeed*, *you annoying fucker*). Then he attempts to stifle a yawn, not altogether successfully, and pushes up his glasses with his forefinger to try and hide it. Oh Christ, this is tedious. Why doesn't Crawford say something? Will assumes it's an attempt at a power-play, possibly outright intimidation – *now look here you little upstart, you might think you've been wheeled in to save the day but let there be no mistake about who's really in charge here* – and wishes he could tell the older man to save their mutual time and simply not bother. After all, far more authentically frightening people have tried to overawe him before now, and they (mostly) didn't accomplish it either.

"So." Jack Crawford clears his throat, having apparently decided that the awkward silence has lasted sufficiently long. Will raises his eyebrows expectantly. "Here you are."

This seems too self-evident to require confirmation, so Will just smiles politely and allows his eyes to drift to a patch of wall behind Crawford's head while secretly thinking that if this is Scotland Yard's idea of observational acuity then it's not really surprising that they require outside help from the likes of him. The office is airless and stifling, the catchless windows preventing any kind of ventilation, and he wants to take his jacket off and loosen his collar but is concerned the gesture would appear too casual for a first meeting, possibly even rude; particularly when Crawford appears to set such store on protocol himself. Will sighs, almost imperceptibly, and knots his fingers together beneath the desk.

"Good journey?"

"Yes. The Atlantic crossing was remarkably fast; only six days." He briefly considers whether he can be bothered to reproduce the carefully cultivated enthusiasm exhibited in the letter to his father (*the wonders of modern engineering!*) and ultimately decides – no, absolutely not.

“And then a train from Liverpool I suppose?”

Will blinks. Well obviously yes; how else was he supposed to have got here? *Actually sir, I sat on my trunk and pointed it south*. “That’s right,” he says earnestly. At least there’s no temptation to wax lyrical about the wonders of modern engineering in this instance; the train had been unbearably uncomfortable and Will had been miserable with motion sickness for nearly the entire journey.

“Settling in?”

“Thank you, yes.” *No*. Not that an honest answer is either expected or required. Really this whole stilted conversation is ridiculous. Will knows perfectly well that his presence here is little more than a carefully contrived display of *quid pro quo*. He himself has been exiled under a cloud of suspicion and bad feeling, and Commissioner Purnell has called in a favour from the Chief Superintendent in London – allegedly an old college friend although it’s hard to image Purnell, miserable old bastard that he is, having friends of any age or provenance – in an attempt to conceal this and rid himself of Will in a way that reflects well (or at least minimally badly) on the Baltimore force. Effectively they want to deflect attention away from what Will has done; all those…events. Scotland Yard, in turn, has already garnered a spectacular level of opprobrium for its failure to do anything substantive about the Whitechapel murderer so the presence of an American expert is a convenient bone to throw to the press. *I am a bone*, thinks Will gloomily. *An actual bone*. He sighs and peers at Jack Crawford over the top of his glasses.

“You’re younger than I thought you’d be,” says the latter, almost accusingly, as if Will’s youth is something he's arranged on purpose in order to cause maximum inconvenience.

“Right,” says Will, because – who cares anyway?

“Boyish.”

“I guess.” The Beard of Gravitas has obviously failed yet again – how typical. Will sighs to himself one more time, before realising that he's started absent-mindedly stroking it with his left hand, as if it’s an ailing pet.

“You guess! You mean you don’t know?”

“It’s a figure of sp…” Oh fuck it. He reaches over and plucks the tabloid paper from the desk instead, brandishing the stark blocky headline which is screaming out a lurid account of the most recent murder. “So,” he says. “Why is he called *Jack*?”

Crawford glances up sharply, as if suspecting some kind of insubordination, but Will recruits the wide eyes and young face to get off the bench and put their respective skills into play and the resulting innocent stare deflects suspicion successfully. Crawford shifts awkwardly in his chair; Will mentally gives himself a smug victory handshake.

“Well the Ripper part is obvious.”

Well – yes, thinks Will irritably, *which is why I didn’t ask about that part*.

“The ‘Jack’ aspect – well, he came up with that himself,” says Crawford grimly, and Will raises his eyebrows, trying to appear poised and politely interested despite the fact that every single hair on the back of his neck has just stood on end.

“The Central News Agency received a letter on September 27 signed Jack the Ripper. Here.” Crawford pushes a piece of typed paper across the desk. “The original was handwritten of course – in red ink, no less – but the transcript is exact, including the punctuation and spelling errors. It’s not the first letter to arrive claiming to come from him, but this one was different. This one we took seriously.”

“Why?”

There’s a grim pause. “Because it contained information that only the murderer would know.”

The paper is now directly in front of Will, just lying there and looking innocent enough – despite the fact that for all the horror and misery it’s going to herald it may as well be a stick of dynamite or a bottle marked with a skull and crossbones. *Once I pick this up*, thinks Will, a bit wildly, *once I’ve read it then there’s no going back*. Crawford clears his throat, obviously impatient; and Will reaches out a hand, slowly as possible, trying to delay the official start of his involvement with this living nightmare. He realises he’s now paying more attention to his hand than he is to Crawford, or even the actual letter. It’s an odd sensation: watching it reaching out, the way the fingers are flexing and jerking…like an alien thing that doesn’t belong to him as it treacherously sets the game in motion. Wincing slightly, he takes a deep breath and then begins to read:

25 Sept. 1888.

Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they wont fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha ha. The next job I do I shall clip the lady’s ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly wouldnt you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work then give it out straight. My knife’s so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good luck.

Yours truly

Jack the Ripper

Dont mind me giving the trade name

PS Wasn't good enough to post this before I got all the red ink off my hands curse it No luck yet. They say I'm a doctor now. ha ha

Will frowns to himself when he gets to the end of this missive, then gazes into space for a few seconds before reading it again. The jaunty, mocking tone, the terminology: a delineation of horror that's almost light-hearted in its levity. No, the whole thing feels…wrong. "I don't think this is genuine," he finally says.

Now it's Crawford's turn to raise his eyebrows. "Oh? And you think it's a hoax because…?"

"Several reasons. On the basis of the scenes described to me, the type of person who's committing these crimes wouldn't correspond like this. It's too organized and rational – too coherent. This letter is playacting. It's the interpretation of an educated, articulate person of what a demented murderer ought to sound like." As an afterthought he adds: "And it's far too contrived. There's no way a killer of this type would refer to the murders as 'funny little games.' Nor is he planning ahead to future crimes in the way described here – again, that would be too organised. He's chaotic and impulsive; he only knows what he's doing in the moment."

Jack Crawford narrows his eyes. "Why are you so opposed to him being organised and rational? He's shown enough of both capacities to completely evade capture."

"No," snaps Will, "he's just been *lucky*. He's extraordinarily violent and dangerous, but likewise unstable, reckless and immature. He's not even sophisticated enough to try and conceal the bodies."

Crawford pulls a sceptical face. "We consider that he leaves them in full view in order to taunt the police. Hence the mocking tone of the letter."

Will shakes his head, frowning impatiently and leaning forward in his chair. "Mr Crawford, I gather from the medical report that an attempt was made to remove the head of one of the victims? Consider that for a moment. This is a man who tried to decapitate someone in the *middle of the street*. That indicates a level of disturbance which precludes organisation; and it's certainly not the type of disturbance which sits down afterwards and composes a letter like this."

"Yes, but the reference to removing her ears…"

"They weren't removed though were they?" says Will. "I've seen the autopsy notes. They were damaged, yes, but not *missing*. The writer just made a guess – and considering the extent of the injuries he probably could have claimed pretty much anything and there would have been some sort of corresponding mark on the body. And nothing actually *was* sent to the police; the threat wasn't followed through."

"Well, no, but…"

“So why not do what he said? I gather all the mutilations are carried out when the women are already dead, so it’s not as if there was anything to prevent him. Yet he didn’t, did he? And I’m saying that the reason he didn’t is because this letter didn’t come from him.” Crawford leans back in chair, regarding Will meditatively. “Mr Crawford, I’m serious. Don’t let the investigation be overly influenced by this letter; no suspects should be eliminated on handwriting samples. And try to play it down in the press, if you can.”

“Why?”

“Because,” says Will grimly, “we don’t know what impact this sort of misrepresentation could be having on the *actual* killer.”

Crawford makes another uncomfortable twisting motion in his chair and Will brandishes the transcript. “You say it was sent to The Central News Agency?”

“It was.”

“Well then. I’d be extremely surprised if this didn’t turn out to be the work of an enterprising journalist.”

“Interesting,” says Crawford, and Will immediately recognises the carefully non-committal tone. It means that if Will’s proved right, Crawford can claim he supported the insight all along; and if it goes the other way then ‘of course *I* never encouraged such a stupid theory’ can be brandished around with equal vigour.

Will sighs inwardly. “Why ‘Leather Apron’?” is all he says.

“It was a name the local prostitutes came up with,” Crawford replies. “A boot-finisher named John Pizer. He had a history of abusive behaviour; apparently he was running some kind of extortion racket: beating the women, demanding money from them, that kind of thing. The press got hold of it and he was a promising suspect for a while but nothing actually came of it. He had an alibi for the last murder that was irrefutable.” Crawford shakes his head and briefly looks overwhelmed, no doubt reliving the disappointment of losing the only hopeful lead for putting an end to the horror of it all. “I’ll be frank with you Mr Graham, no one was prepared for something like this. It’s…” He waves his hand around, a bit helplessly. “It’s unprecedented. News of this has carried all over the world.”

Will glances at him with a newfound compassion, imagining what it must be like to wake up one morning and find yourself steering a murder investigation whose gravity and grisliness has warranted international attention. “Yes,” he says sympathetically. “I saw that the papers were covering it while I was in New York.” In fact he’s well aware that it was being reported in papers within virtually every single state, but is careful not to point this out.

“New York!” says Crawford. “That’s nothing. It’s been reported in Mexico, Jamaica, South Africa…Recently it was being written about in *New Zealand*.”

Will opens his mouth to say ‘Shit’ and converts it into “Shocking” at the last moment, then glances down at the clippings from *The Bush Advocate* which Crawford is pushing towards him and gives an involuntary shudder. The headline proclaims *LONDON MURDERS;*

FURTHER ATROCITIES; GREAT EXCITEMENT in shrieking capital letters and he can just about make out "*It is said that the mutilation of the body of the murdered woman in the Aldgate district eclipses the horrors in connection with similar outrages in Whitechapel…*" before pushing them away again.

"Speaking of the media coverage," he says after a pause. "The other reference in the letter: 'They say I'm a doctor now.' I suppose that's been reported in the press?"

"Yes."

"Because of the mutilations?"

Crawford nods.

"And do you actually believe that, or is it the journalists speculating?"

"It's not conclusive. There's been a difference of opinion."

"You got my request about the medical examination?"

"I did, and it's already been arranged. Dr Jim Price. He's a City Police surgeon – very accomplished."

"Good. And I'd like to be present myself."

"That shouldn't be a problem." Crawford sighs slightly and shifts again in his chair. "Of course if he'd kept to his original pattern then it might have been less contested, but the manner of the current mutilations casts doubt on the nature of the first."

"First?" says Will sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you mean you don't *know*?" replies Crawford. "These current murders aren't the only ones – there was a series early this year. Although it was largely kept out of the press."

"How?"

"Mostly because they were spread much further apart. They didn't obviously link together as a series, so the level of panic wasn't the same." He turns and rummages in a filing cabinet behind him, grunting with the effort, and retrieves a sheaf of pathologist's photographs which he hands to Will. "I know," he sympathetically when the latter begins to frown. "But I'm afraid you're going to have to learn to be a bit less squeamish."

Will shakes his head. "No – no it's not that. It's the photographs. They're *different*. These were done by a different perpetrator."

"There were organs removed in both cases."

"So?"

“So you think there are more than two individuals in the same timespan running around taking people’s organs out?” Jack Crawford leans back in his chair and gives Will a condescending look. “I don’t know what you’re used to in America Mr Graham, but this is London not Medieval Europe. For God’s sake man, this is the centre of the civilised world!”

Will gives Jack a look of his own, which indicates exactly how many fucks he absolutely does not give about civilisation. “Your faith in humanity is very commendable Mr Crawford, but I’m afraid it’s misplaced. Admittedly these types of offences aren’t common, but it’s entirely plausible that more than one perpetrator is committing them simultaneously. As is *obviously* the case here,” he adds defiantly.

Jack drums his fingers on the table and Will stares back at him, refusing to drop his eyes first. “These photographs are of male victims. Were any of the attacks on prostitutes?”

“No, but…”

“In the East End?”

“No, but…”

“So the victim profile is completely different. A member of the London Philharmonic, a trustee at the British Museum…” Will pauses and peers incredulously at the typed pages, “… a *maître d'hôtel* at the Albemarle? I mean – seriously. And on the basis of these photographs the method of attack varies in numerous critical ways. *These*,” he brandishes the photos again, “were committed by someone who knew what they were doing. And they’re not frenzied; look how the incisions have been made. These murders were performed in a measured way with a level of care and control that’s completely absent from the current ones.”

“Very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” says Jack petulantly.

“No, I’m just sure of the evidence.”

“Well the evidence isn’t all in yet. Anyway, you’re not a doctor are you?”

Now it’s Will’s turn to look irritated. “No.”

“No medical training at all?”

“*No*.”

“Well then.” Jack leans back in his chair and triumphantly folds his arms over the front of his waistcoat, obviously feeling that he’s put Will in his place.

“You asked for my opinion; I’m giving it to you.”

“Yes – and I’d like you to season your opinions with a bit more caution. This…what this is. It’s something *new*. None of us have ever seen anything like this before.”

“I have,” says Will bleakly.

“Well, be that as it may, we still can’t be jumping to conclusions on the basis of some photographs can we?” Will grits his teeth, finding the ‘we’ to be enormously patronizing; or maybe Crawford just uses the Royal We as standard, like the Queen? “Expert consultation is needed for areas like this,” Crawford adds, and it takes a truly heroic application of self-control for Will to resist snapping: *isn’t that what I’m supposed to be?*

Instead he gives a rather crooked smile. “Whatever you say. *Sir*.”

Jack glances up again, and this time Will can’t be bothered to recruit the wide eyed, youthful faced stare in the services of feigning innocence. “Speaking of *which*,” says Jack peevishly “I’d like you to begin working through this list. Esteemed medical practitioners, selected by the Chief Superintendent himself. We want to canvass specialist knowledge and professional authority regarding the nature of the mutilations.” Which sounds so much like a press release that Will nearly laughs in Crawford’s face – if not for the awareness that he’s just been relegated to this menial task as punishment for the obviously rebellious ‘sir.’ The wily old bastard. Wearily he picks up the list and runs his eyes over the first few entries.

“Hannibal Lecter?” he says. “That’s a very unusual name.”

“He’s *foreign*,” answers Jack in a needlessly fastidious voice.

He’s foreign, mimics Will to himself in a malicious approximation of Crawford’s accent (which although undoubtedly childish is also highly amusing; so he does it again). “Oh yes, I see,” he says out loud. “Rule Britannia.” And then before Jack can admonish him for being insufficiently servile: “How do I get to Harley Street?”

“You could get there in around half an hour, if you walk fast,” says Jack waspishly. “Simple as can be. Just head towards Piccadilly Circus then up Regent Street.”

“That’s quite a lot of time for a single house call…Sir. I suppose I could get a cab?”

“Harley Street is the medical district; you’ll be able to see several of the other doctors while you’re there. And you should definitely walk. Get a bit of a sense of the city.”

“Good idea,” says Will; then leaves the building and promptly flags down a hackney carriage, not because he particularly wants one but because he can’t resist sending a mental ‘fuck off’ to that officious bastard Jack Crawford.

“American?” asks the driver when Will enquires if the cab is free. He pronounces it “‘*Merican*.”

“No,” says Will, just for the hell of it.

“No? Not ‘merican? Where you from then?”

Will tries to remember where it is that the Queen lives. “Windsor,” he says brightly.

“Windsor! No, you’re having me on guv'nor! You’re having me on!”

Guv'nor? “Look, just take me here please,” says Will handing over the paper with the address.

“Harley Street; you after a doctor then guv? You ill or something? You don’t look it.”

I know, I never looked it, thinks Will despairingly. He retreats into the dim, cigar-smoky depths of the cab, pressing his forehead against the cooling glass of the window pane. *That was always the problem.*

*****

In a grubby office in Fleet Street, Freddy Lounds is lounging at his desk idly listening to his Editor ranting about the less than stellar sales figures for the most recent edition. *The Tattle Crime* has its base here, as does virtually every other major periodical and newspaper; Fleet Street being the journalistic hub of the country and destined to remain so for most of the next century. It’s also sporadically commemorated in some of the more disrespectable public theatres as the home of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* – who, despite being fictitious, featured in a series of articles last year (by Freddy) implying very strongly that he was not only real but currently operating with his cannibalistic accomplice Mrs Lovett via some of the capital’s more popular pie shops. It had briefly created quite the panic amongst their more credulous readers; Freddy smiles fondly at the memory.

“I wasn’t aware I said anything *amusing*,” snaps the Editor.

“No sir.”

“So, how is it,” snarls the latter, “that *The London Times* gets a photograph of him and *The Tattle Crime* doesn’t? Explain it to me Mr Lounds. Astonish me with your acumen.”

Freddy merely shrugs; a deliberately insolent gesture that would be a punishable offence, possibly even dismissible, in a younger reporter. But Freddy is a veteran, and unscrupulous with it (which in this world of sensationalism, sales and unsavoury practice is a valuable attribute to have) so the management are generally disposed to tolerate excesses in him that would be permitted in virtually no one else.

The Editor now pauses and takes a moment to inspect the picture more closely. “He’s rather photogenic isn’t he?”

Freddy shrugs again. Having never possessed any particular measure of good looks himself he tends towards despising them in other people. “I *suppose* so,” he finally says.

“Well that makes him more marketable,” the Editor adds in a warning voice.

“Sir,” drawls Freddy. He casts the picture a sneering look, as if youth, talent and beauty are enormously contemptible – and he’s both proud and relieved that cunning and resourcefulness have enabled him to evade such burdens himself.

“It’s a shame this maniac is only targeting women,” muses the Editor with genuine regret. “It might have been a good angle to push otherwise.” He screws up his eyes as if admiring the

imaginary headlines.

“Well he is, so we can’t,” says Freddy rudely.

“So find something else then,” comes the reply. “This face will sell papers, so I want you to come up with something. The police incompetence line has done well so far but the public is going to get bored with it. They *are* getting bored with it. We need something new.” He brandishes the photograph in Freddy’s face so there can be no mistake as to exactly what the something new should be. “The American link adds a bit of glamour, so make sure it’s mentioned as often as possible.”

“I’m already onto it Boss. Letters have been despatched to Baltimore – on their way as we speak. I expect a reply within a fortnight. Much faster if they use the Transatlantic Cable.”

The Editor nods, finally satisfied, before observing: “You’re a good man Fred.” Of course this is not *exactly* what Freddy is (at least not in any commonly accepted sense of the word) and the two of them exchange a wry grin when the phrase is uttered, like people enjoying a private joke.

“Of course it may be that the rumours were exaggerated,” adds Freddy slyly. He casts a look at the Editor from under his pale eyelashes, as if daring the latter to contradict him. “It *might* be that Inspector Graham is a fine, upstanding citizen and has done nothing of which the British public has a right to know.”

“The British public knows what we tell it to,” says the Editor firmly. “If the rumours turn out to be exaggerated then what’s to stop us running them anyway? That’s Inspector Graham’s problem, not ours. Just write ‘allegedly’ and we’re on firm legal ground. He can’t touch us.”

“No,” agrees Freddy. “But we can touch him.” As if to demonstrate this he places his finger over the picture of Will’s face, an unknowingly mocking counterpoint to the way Hannibal performed the same gesture less than 24 hours ago. His fingers are damp with newspaper ink, and when he takes his hand away Will’s features have been obscured beneath a black smear.

“Exaggerated or not – we go to press,” affirms the Editor. He nods again, then claps Freddy on the shoulder and prepares to depart to his own office, taking the occasional detour on the way to see if there are any other staff members whom he can usefully terrorise. Freddy watches him go, a mocking smile playing round his thin lips, then returns his attention to the copy of *The London Times* which the Editor has left on his desk. Inspector Graham looks far less talented, prodigious or pretty when daubed with *Tattle Crime* ink. It’s an interesting thing…how these rumours swirl around him like smoke and which, exaggerated or not, appear destined to go to be front page news. Freddy smiles again. That’s the best part of all.

“But I suspect they’re *not* exaggerated,” he tells the photo softly. “Are they Will?”

*****

On route to Harley Street, the subject of these reflections is slumped back against the greasy leather of the seat and staring mindlessly out of the window as the carriage clatters over the cobbles toward his destination. God knows how he’s going to get home again; no doubt this

was all part of Jack Crawford's revenge ploy. One of the cab window panes is broken, which Will knows is a punishable offence under The Public Health Act (or something) which ought to be reported; but in an aimless display of rebellion opts to show solidarity with the lawless and refuse to mention it.

Even though he suspects he's probably being overly resentful, possibly even petty, he can't help smarting over Crawford's refusal to take his suggestion of two distinct perpetrators seriously. Perhaps it wouldn't be so galling if there was a level of uncertainty, but Will *knows* that he's right – preposterous to think that the same person is responsible for both. The second set targeting wretched, desperate women; the first levelled at men in positions of influence and authority. The second a turmoil of desperate escalation; the first, by Crawford's own admission, paced and controlled and spread over a period of time. The second frenzied and intemperate; the first displaying a measure of nuance and management. A certain…*flair*. Will winces slightly, uncomfortably aware of what an inappropriate choice of adjective this is. It's certainly never one that he'd share with Jack Crawford, even if – in a purely practical sense – it's actually true. Will sighs unhappily, struck yet again by a crushing sense of injustice that he's been forced into the position of considering human horror in these terms. It's one of the many reasons he objected so strongly to the fawning newspaper coverage: it feels like his fate, rather than his merit, to be so proficient at what he does. And this reflection, in turn, leads to an even worse one, which is the reality of what he's actually going to *have* to do – the dark labyrinths; the deranged derailment; the twists and turns; the nauseous, reeking resonance of someone else's madness, oh *God* – and it takes an enormous amount of effort not to crumple against the broken window with his head in his hands. *Not yet though*, thinks Will, desperately trying to pull himself together. *Not yet, not yet*. Today he doesn't have to do anything except speak with a succession of pompous medical practitioners who'll no doubt offer very little in the way of insights whilst demanding an enormous amount of time and deference in return. And that while this might be bad, it's very far from being *terrible*.

More for the purposes of distraction than genuine interest he takes another look at the list. *Hannibal.* He has a dim recollection of the name from a history class at school and frowns with the effort of trying to remember the details. Something about Alps and elephants. Although that doesn't seem like a very likely combination…perhaps he's mistaking it for something else. It *is* an odd name though; very distinctive. Memorable. In fact it makes Will feel grateful for the dull, anonymous normalcy of his own name. He has enough uncomfortable claims to idiosyncrasy – *more* than enough – without being labelled as such from the first seconds of introduction. There are Wills, Williams, Bills and Billies in abundance, all merging into each other and jostling over who can be the most commonplace and unremarkable. On the contrary, one would need to possess an excessive level of presence and personality to carry off a name like Hannibal; a timid, nondescript person would end up crushed under the weight of it. Then he briefly wonders whether Dr Lecter is up to the task of bearing his own Christian name before abandoning the whole train of thought on the grounds that he doesn't actually care either way.

The house, when they eventually reach it, is far more elegant and refined than Will was expecting. In fact it hardly seems plausible that something as relatively mundane as doctoring should be conducted behind so much immaculate brickwork and graceful Georgian symmetry. He knocks briskly on the door which is promptly opened by a maidservant (at

least he thinks that's what she is – the endless designations for English domestics are rather confusing), who's middle-aged and earnest-looking with glossy brown hair nestled under a neat little cap – and her presence surprises Will somewhat, because given the stateliness of the premises he'd half-expected something akin to a liveried footman. He doles out what he hopes is a calming yet competent smile and announces who he is, at which point the maid (or housekeeper, or…whatever) seizes the front of her apron and declares in tragic tones: "The police? Oh *sir*."

Will is accustomed to this type of fretful reaction, so begins to deliver his standard speech (also calming yet competent; at least that is the plan) explaining that there is no cause to be alarmed, and that he merely wants to speak with the owner of the house. But here a second problem presents itself because the woman is clearly having difficulties with deciphering his accent and keeps repeating his statements in various states of misinterpretation ("Did you say you've already *spoken* with Dr Lecter? But I don't think he's *expecting* you; but *sir*, he's still here in the house…") until Will feels like he's starting to go a bit mad.

"What is going on here Mary?" asks a male voice from the darkness of the passageway.

It is a deep voice, very low and resonant with a curious smoky edge to the vowels, and while there is no hesitancy in the English it has an accent that is strongly foreign-sounding although Will can't place where it's from. He's also unable to see the speaker because of the dimness of the interior and the anxious bulk of Mary, so is about to re-perform The Speech before deciding that he can't really be bothered (not least because the voice sounds sufficiently calm and competent for all three of them), so just loudly announces his name instead. And after Mary has swivelled round and announced "It's the police. Oh *sir*," (recurring); and Will has put his hands in his pockets before realising how unprofessional this looks (so takes them out) and then remembered he doesn't actually care about looking professional (so puts them back in again); and Mary has begun wringing her apron in both hands until there's a real risk of it disintegrating; and Will is reflecting on a certain sense of unfairness that if she has no problem with *that* accent then why can't she understand *his*...then the owner of the voice has moved forward and stepped out of the gloom to appear on the doorstep, at which point both Mary and Will fall silent at exactly the same time.

Will looks up (necessary because of his lower vantage point on the pavement but also owing to the speaker being unusually tall) and then blinks a few times at the sleek, imposing apparition that's confronting him: because although he doesn't have a clearly formed idea of what exactly he *was* expecting, there's also no question that he wasn't expecting…that. Then a brief silence follows in which no one moves or speaks and which strikes Will as somewhat eerie, as if the entire street is holding its breath. Or maybe it's his own breath; in that moment he's not entirely sure. And then the owner of the voice, and thus the owner of the house, and thus Dr Hannibal Lecter looks back down at him before taking a single step closer (poised and deliberate) and saying, with a slow inscrutable smile:

"So – Inspector Will Graham. What a very fateful coincidence; I would hardly have thought it possible. It appears that we are destined to meet in person after all."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the History Corner – pull up a chair!

This is a reproduction of the notorious ”Dear Boss” letter which, as described here, is where the name Jack the Ripper originated. Although considered authentic for many years, it’s now generally agreed by historians to have been the work of a journalist – something also felt by many members of Scotland Yard CID at the time. I based Will’s analysis of the letter on that of John E. Douglas, creator of the FBI’s Criminal Profiling Programme and Thomas Harris’ real-life inspiration for Jack Crawford (and Bryan Fuller’s for Will Graham – including the encephalitis!). In this respect Douglas created a psychological profile for the murderer as part of an intriguing BBC documentary (‘The Secret Identity of Jack the Ripper’), and I'll be drawing from his insights during the course of this story. Which is actually all a bit meta isn't it? *head explodes*

The notion of the Whitechapel murders being copycat killings is a genuine theory amongst some historians (although the crimes in question also involved prostitutes and bear no resemblance to the ones described here). The reference to John Pizer is likewise based on historical fact, as is the uncertainty over whether ‘Jack the Ripper’ had expert anatomical knowledge. Due to the passage of time this will almost certainly remain unresolved, so from now on I’ll be putting my own slant on it.

cough Having said all that, this is also probably a good time to ‘fess up that I am by no means an expert on either this historical period or series of crimes. While I do as much fact checking as I have time for, mistakes are likely to creep through so apologies in advance!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will, to his infinite irritation, finds himself disarmed by this rather startling statement; and instead of responding in kind with something calmly contemplative, or dismissive (or even demanding Dr Lecter explain what the hell he's talking about, possibly followed by "in the name of the law!" announced in ringing tones…or not), is temporarily confused into silence. As an attempt to save face he tries to give the impression that his muteness is deliberate and merely raises his eyebrows as if to imply that 'such enigmatic poise is not having any effect on *me*, thank you very much, so why don't you save that shit for someone else?' – although the success of the strategy is negligible at best; because Hannibal Lecter is still staring at Will in a cool, considered way, and Will is finding it impossible not to stare back at him, and Mary is staring at both of them, one to the other (like someone at a tennis match), until Hannibal finally draws back slightly – not once breaking eye contact – and calmly declares: "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," replies Will, relieved that someone has finally taken control of the situation even while earnestly wishing it had been him who first took the initiative. He tentatively steps inside, arching his entire body like a street lamp to avoid brushing against Dr Lecter's coat (the latter being so tall and imposing that he seems to be absorbing every possible atom of space in the vicinity), and which is an endeavour by no means assisted by the fact that the hallway is far too narrow to comfortably accommodate three people. In the resulting confusion Will drops his hat, which Mary makes a big performance of retrieving for him whilst pompously brushing off imaginary flecks of dust, despite the hallway being immaculate with no trace of dust, dirt or other domestic disturbance to be seen. Will wishes he could tell her not to bother (in this respect much of his life seems to be comprised of wistfully reflecting on things he wishes he could do but can't) because he hates that fucking hat – if he could he'd drop-kick the bastard thing down the street. Not that the hat is a particularly offensive example of its kind, he just hates all hats: roaming around bare-headed with collar unfastened and shirt sleeves rolled up feels far more suitable. Although he supposes it's worse for women: all those bonnets, bodices, bustles and confining, deforming corsets; bound and trussed like delicate instruments of torture to the extent that the better-off require maids to help them dress because the task is too elaborate to accomplish unaided… and then Will realizes he has strayed off into a pointlessly rambling mental trajectory and really shouldn't be stood in the hallway staring off into space while thinking about corsets, so clears his throat awkwardly and thanks Mary for the retrieval of the hat (even though – fuck the hat). Dr Lecter is just standing there observing the whole thing with a faint half-smile on his face.

Mary deferentially reaches around Will to close the door, which shuts with a deep, sonorous thud; and he immediately can't help noticing how gloomy it is now the airy lightness and bustling noise of the street have been banished outside. The lack of windows doesn't help. He supposes candles would be a bit excessive during the daytime, but really the dimness is oppressive and the faint incense-like odour puts one in mind of a crypt. Then he reproaches

himself (again) for being fanciful and over-imaginative, when all that's really happening is that he's stood in an inadequately-lit hallway in one of the more exclusive districts of London with the smell of cleaning wax tickling his nostrils. Dr Lecter is still staring at Will in a frank, unabashed way; and Will is now trying not to catch the latter's eye by looking at Mary instead, despite the fact she's not doing anything of particular note beyond standing against the wall with her hands neatly clasped in front of her apron. It's the type of trim, orderly stance that Will suspects is probably taught to domestics as standard (he can already imagine a matronly housekeeper instructing the maids in deportment: *"spick and span at all times!"*) but nevertheless she still manages to look vaguely slovenly in comparison to Dr Lecter, who has all the poise and posture of a bit of Grecian sculpture in the British Museum. There's a short silence, and Will tries to move away before realising he's hemmed in on all sides and there isn't really anywhere to go.

"Is there somewhere we could talk privately?" he finally says, in a vague attempt at regaining some influence over the situation, if not over himself as well.

"Yes, of course," comes the smooth reply. Where *is* that accent from? "Come through to the consulting room. Mary, no visitors for the next hour if you please." The latter performs a neat curtsey and withdraws and Will, who is unused to such displays of obsequiousness, can't help internally sneering at it. Nevertheless he still follows behind Dr Lecter dutifully enough, and has to remind himself that he is a member of The Socialistic Labor Party (admittedly in secret, but even so) and has read *The Communist Manifesto* as well as *Discourse on Inequality* (both currently in his trunk with emphatic underlining, exclamation marks, and pencilled notes in the margins) and is not about to perform the male equivalent of curtseying for *anyone*. Dr Lecter moves rather elegantly for someone so tall, but also quickly, and Will hastens his own pace so as to leave no suspicions that he is maintaining a respectful distance (or, potentially even worse, is lagging behind on the basis of having somewhat shorter legs). Owing to the appellation of 'consulting room,' he's expecting to be taken somewhere confined and clinical; and is once again somewhat surprised to be lead into a sumptuously-appointed apartment full of gleaming wood and richly jewel-toned fabrics of ruby, amethyst and sapphire, as well as an entire floor of books whose shelves are accessible only by a ladder. Books are expensive; hardly anyone he knows possesses a substantial number of them, and beyond a visit to the congressional library during a brief placement in Washington he's never seen so many together in a single place. He gazes at the display, somewhat overawed.

"Inspector Graham?"

Will is suddenly aware of how much he's staring, and of how rude this probably is, and spins rounds awkwardly. "I'm sorry, it's just that your residence is extremely…" the word *handsome* comes to mind, and he quickly dismisses this as too fulsome, "...extremely striking, and I couldn't help…I mean it's not the sort of place I usually visit. I'm more likely to be in…" he trails off again. God, this is ridiculous – even he usually manages to be more composed than this. It's like he dropped his poise and self-possession in the hallway along with the hat.

"You like books?"

“Yes,” says Will in an unconsciously wistful voice.

“You are quite welcome to borrow any if you wish to. I own far more than I shall ever have the leisure to read.”

Will looks longingly at the leather spines then falters again. “Might you not need them to hand? For your work, I mean?”

“Not at all; anything I require I invariably commit to memory. I have the most conveniently prodigious powers of recall. Besides, it will give you a reason to return.” Until this point Hannibal has been stood several paces away with his back to the fireplace but now he suddenly takes a few steps closer, looming into Will’s space with an imperious air as if he has an imperishable right to be in it. The way he carries himself is striking – very fast, yet extremely controlled and measured – and in spite of himself Will feels intimidated and automatically takes a step back.

There’s a pause. “Why do you imagine I would want to do that?” asks Will slowly.

“Why, in order to restore them to me of course; and therefore appropriate more.” (Slow smile). “What other reason could there be?”

Will clears his throat. “I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Oh do not be concerned about *that*,” says Hannibal. “I would not allow you to inconvenience me.” He gifts Will with another piercing stare (although Will is more prepared for this one and defiantly catches it and flings it back), and then abruptly folds himself into a wing-backed chair and steeples his fingers in front of his face, regarding Will over the top of them.

“Please – sit. Can I offer you refreshments of any kind?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine.”

“Very good. So then, let us proceed. I suppose you have come to consult me about the recent events in Whitechapel?”

Will blinks a few times. “How did you…”

Hannibal waves this away with a flicker of one elegant hand. “I observed you in the newspaper. “

“Oh yes,” says Will gloomily. “That.”

“Yes, indeed.” Now Hannibal leans back in his chair, eyes still fixed on Will’s face, although neither a nuance of expression nor tone of voice betray even the slightest indication of how *very* surprised (and – truth be told – deeply gratified) he is to find the subject of last night’s reflections delivered straight into his home as if ordained by cosmic delivery. And just as skittish and spirited as the photograph promised. Of course in addition it really ought to be hugely rewarding to have one’s opinions precisely confirmed, especially when hewn from

such insubstantial raw materials; but Hannibal is so used to be being proved correct that the corroboration provides nothing more than a fleeting satisfaction.

"I didn't want them to publish it," adds Will in an endearingly mournful way.

"Not at all, it reflects very creditably on you." *Very* creditably; Hannibal's smile grows slightly broader. "And yet so extremely far from home?"

"Yes, I…" Will hesitates. "I was…unwell earlier in the year." *Careful,* he thinks. "I had a brain fever; a bad one. Very bad. A complete change of climate was recommended as part of the convalescence." Even as he's saying this he's aware of how implausible it sounds, his current activities hardly being conducive to any kind of convalescence (as well as the English climate being of an inhospitable dourness and…and *shitness* which would be enough to finish off any self-respecting invalid). But considering the grisliness of the subject matter, claiming his professional abilities were of such high repute that he was sent for apropos of nothing somehow feels like it would be worse; even though it's partly true.

"I see," is the only reply. Then the Sphinx-like smile briefly reappears and Will can't help sensing that Hannibal isn't genuinely falling for it – not for one moment. "And you are currently under the administration of Mr Jack Crawford?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I know most people." This said in a casual, airy tone. *No you don't*, thinks Will, *no one does.* He hates complacent, arrogant statements like this. Meaningless too: where could one possibly draw the line? The whole of London? Of England? Of the *world*? Of those Not Yet Born and Still To Be? Pretentious old bastard.

"*I* don't," says Will defiantly. "I hardly know anyone. I suppose I'm not significant enough – although it's generally been a policy of mine to know as few people as possible." But Hannibal doesn't respond with defensiveness or self-conscious irritation at this obvious put-down; just continues regarding Will with the same inscrutable expression, and in the end it's the latter who ends up feeling awkward and discomfited, like a child who's been allowed to sit in the parlour with the adults and whose conduct is found wanting. For some demented reason, the Biblical sense of 'to know' has also veered into his mind in a highly unfortunate way. *And Adam knew his wife Eve*. Oh God. He hopes he's not blushing. At least the beard might hide the worst of it.

"I have hosted him a number of times," Hannibal adds after a delicate pause. "It is an indulgence of mine to occasionally have friends for dinner." The Mona Lisa smile grows fractionally broader and Will blinks a few more times. "So. A threat is at large; Mr Crawford is setting his pack in pursuit; and you, in your acuteness, have been petitioned to come all the way from America to lead the onslaught."

Will clears his throat again, then raises his eyebrows in a 'well…if you *insist* on putting it that way' gesture.

"But to *summon* you – I must confess that he did not strike me as the type of individual who would readily concede a need for outside assistance."

“No,” agrees Will, “he doesn’t really.” This is actually putting it mildly; Crawford’s sullen resentment of his presence had been palpable.

“Yet here you are regardless. So tell me, Inspector Graham; what exactly is it that you do?”

It strikes Will that Hannibal has so neatly commandeered control of their particular conversational ship that rather than being the interviewer (on behalf of the Royal Constabulary of Her Majesty the Queen, etc. etc., *ad nauseum*) he is now effectively being interviewed himself. Nevertheless he’s not yet inclined to mutiny – and is honest enough to admit to himself that it’s actually rather agreeable to have someone demonstrate a genuine and seemingly benevolent interest in him. So he settles back in his own chair and replies: “I interpret forensic evidence.”

“How intriguing,” says Hannibal, and he sounds as if he really means it. “From what? Or perhaps, more to the point – from where?”

From myself, Will wants to say, although of course he doesn’t. “From a behavioural perspective.”

“Oh, indeed? And yet you do not claim to be a doctor; your expertise does not lie in human beings *per se*.”

“No – not *per se*.”

“And yet you use the term ‘behaviour.’” Hannibal smiles to himself, as if he is enjoying this game. “A behaviourist with no tangible behaviour to examine, because your participation comes before the individual is apprehended rather than afterwards. Ah, yes, I have it now. You examine the fragments and traces a criminal has left *behind* him – whether he does so by oversight or by design; although even such a distinction as that, I would suppose, is grist to your intuitive mill – and from these little morsels you set to work, construing a narrative as to his procedure and purpose.”

“Not just ‘him,’” says Will, rather irritated (even as he is impressed) by such a calmly precise deconstruction of what he does. “Women can be criminally-minded too, you know.”

“Oh certainly, I have no doubt that women can be just as iniquitous and lawless we can.” Will glances up at this, struck by the slightly eccentric choice of ‘we’ rather than ‘men’ plural. Perhaps it’s a grammar lapse on account of not being a native English speaker? “But your own speciality Inspector Graham; such very violent crimes as you investigate. And they *are* your speciality, aren’t they? You would hardly have come so far otherwise. No, those types of crimes are not typically committed by women.”

“True,” agrees Will, reluctant to concede a point but feeling it would be impossibly grudging and churlish to do otherwise. “In that respect you’re right; it is invariably a male perpetrator.”

Hannibal nods graciously, obviously prepared to be magnanimous. “And am I also right in my surmise of your occupation?”

“Yes,” says Will. “Yes, that’s pretty much it.” Even though it isn’t truly all of it…not entirely. Not the whole thing.

“How very interesting. You are quite the alchemist aren’t you? Purifying and reifying the base elements into the noble ones.”

“No,” replies Will sharply, now suspecting they are back on a footing which is more familiar to him: scepticism tempered by condescension.

There’s another pause and Hannibal, rather than answering, merely tilts his head back slightly and allows himself the luxury of directly staring at Will (who, it must be said, appears able to tolerate the scrutiny with far more forbearance than most people are capable of). Of course, the latter is still extremely…what’s the word? Restless? *Fidgety?* Eyes darting around the room; fingers anxiously twitching at the cuff of his jacket. But Hannibal also senses that it is not his personal presence (or at least not *only* that) which is causing it and he can easily imagine what Will must be like when he’s alone: the biting of nails, the fretful pacing, the running of hands through hair. Such profound unease; as if his skin is constraining and uncomfortable and he would eagerly step out of it should the opportunity present itself. He obviously requires a guiding hand of some sort; indeed, it would probably be quite something to assist such an interesting specimen to grow more comfortable in its own skin. Such pale skin too, as if he’s been starved of sunlight. The notion of ‘cultivation’ promptly comes to mind; a botanical-like word, which in turn reminds Hannibal of yesterday’s analogy of the plant…and he has a brief, inexplicable urge to touch Will in some way with a hand that is either guiding or otherwise: the slim wrists, perhaps, or the full lower lip; or maybe even his hair, which is very lustrous and soft-looking, and has a silken quality to it that would probably feel extremely pleasing against one’s hands or forehead. Most people would be embarrassed or discomfited by such an urge, although Hannibal (of course) is not – instead he merely holds the urge at arm’s length, examines it contemplatively, and then tucks it away for later and more lengthy consideration.

“I am not making fun of you,” he finally says in a kinder voice. “I am entirely sincere. A science of the mind is badly needed. Although doubtless even when it does appear then progress shall be slow and much time will be wasted. I can already see how it will be. The mind shall be distilled and degraded into merely the brain as an organ; as if thoughts, beliefs, behaviour and impulse can all be spliced and sorted as neatly as your own fevered brain tissue.”

“You should go to Paris if it interests you so much,” says Will, who feels like he’s rapidly losing control of this conversation. “All the most significant advances are happening there.”

“*La Salpêtrière*.” Now Hannibal looks amused. “What does the boy from Baltimore know about such things?”

“I’m not offended by that, in case you were wondering,” says Will amicably. “Even if I am from Baltimore.”

“Splendid.” This is said somewhat wryly, and Will smiles at the sense that Hannibal is deliberately mocking the English partiality to this particular epithet; drawing them both into a confederacy in their mutual foreignness. Hannibal smiles too, then adds more seriously:

“Congruent also, because I have no desire to offend you.” Will likewise decides that he believes this to be true, and feels vaguely ashamed at his own previous defensiveness. Not that it’s *entirely* his fault: he’s so used to people trying to deride and belittle him that the habit of pre-empting it is extremely difficult to break.

“We are like refugees from another time, you and I,” Hannibal adds thoughtfully. “I with my yearnings for a proper psychological discipline, and you with your melding of analytic leanings and fascination with conduct and performance. You wish to serve the preservation of law and order, and I desire to deconstruct why people flout it so ardently. I am concerned with cause, you with effect. And consequence too, of course, from your perspective. Indeed, isn’t that what brings you here? As diverting as this conversation has been, I believe you have some questions to ask me.”

“Oh…Yes.” Remarkably, Will realises he had temporarily forgotten all about it, and frowns slightly at such a ridiculous lapse. He takes a sheaf of documents and photographs from his briefcase and hands them to Hannibal; who, to Will’s surprise, merely glances at the first two and then returns his gaze to Will, who in turn clears his throat rather awkwardly.

“Mr Crawford is keen to seek expert opinion on the nature of the injuries inflicted,” Will finally says, and Hannibal gives a small, gracious incline of the head in acknowledgement of the implied compliment. “There’s some contention over whether the perpetrator has formal medical knowledge.”

“Because of the evisceration?”

“Correct.”

“How perverse that would be,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “The physician who inverts their skills in such a way.”

“My own instinct is that he hasn’t,” adds Will. “But the current series is being conflated – wrongly, I would say – with a spate of separate murders earlier in the year. They think it’s the same person but I could immediately tell from the photographs that it’s not.” He frowns again, remembering Jack’s glib dismissal, before adding firmly: “Not anywhere close.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and then leans forward very, very slightly. “How interesting,” he says after a pause. “You are a perceptive boy, aren’t you?”

Will’s hand automatically flies to his face as if to imply ‘I think you’ll find, my good sir, that this is hardly the beard of a mere *boy*’ but changes his mind and abandons the enterprise halfway through: not least because the beard hardly has a stellar success rate in inspiring awe and respect amongst his numerous elders (in this respect…fuck the beard) – and that there’s no avoiding the fact that this striking individual with the piercing eyes and angular face does not even remotely look like a candidate for breaking the trend. Instead he just shrugs and satisfies himself with replying: “It was entirely obvious.” This much, at least, is true; he genuinely doesn’t consider the insight to be particularly impressive.

“And yet it was *not* obvious,” says Hannibal. “Or at least not to anyone else.”

Will smiles in spite of himself, pleased with this response. “Because they can’t get beyond the abstract. In anecdotal terms: they can’t see the wood for the trees. Yet when you look beyond that and see the *way* it was done. The manner the method, the motive, even…” Then he hesitates again because Hannibal is still staring at him and it’s somewhat unnerving. He can’t quite work out if it’s a deliberate attempt to be daunting, or whether the latter is simply more than unusually intense, or possibly just deeply interested (in him, though…surely not?) and the scrutiny is not entirely consciously done. It that moment it doesn’t actually occur to him that it could be a combination of all these things.

“And so here you are,” says Hannibal, “come to shine a light onto dim and shady ignorance. And then, if fortune goes in your favour, onto something darker still.” He pauses and frowns. “Forgive me for the liberty, Inspector Graham, but I hope you intend to take every precaution? You are dealing with an extremely dangerous and desperate individual.”

“Thank you for your concern,” answers Will automatically, because he’s so used to people assuming he’s not capable of taking care of himself.

“Oh I do not merely mean your physical wellbeing,” replies Hannibal. “I mean your peace of mind also. You are doubtless going to be forced to confront some very terrible things. This is why the press, the public, the police – the body politic – are so profoundly fearful and unnerved. Their complacent, sequestered view of the world has been shaken to the core by these crimes.”

“I know.”

“*Do* you?” says Hannibal.

“Yes. This isn’t my first rodeo, as we say in the States.” *Does anyone actually say that, though? Oh God I sound like an idiot*. “I’ve been doing this for a long time,” he adds firmly.

“And it inflamed your brain, did it not? Let us hope your mind was not similarly heated.”

Will opens his mouth and then closes it again. Hannibal stares at him for a few more seconds, and then abruptly gets to his feet.

“And yet here we have been conversing for nearly an hour. I am afraid I have patients to see and cannot give you any further time today.”

Will stands up too, suddenly discomforted. It’s a strange sensation: like waking up from a deep sleep or being doused in the face with cold water. A spell being broken…if that’s not too contrived a way to describe it (it probably is). “Of course,” he stammers, “I’m very sorry to have…”

“Do not apologise, please. I would not have had the morning proceed in any other way. However, you have still not obtained the information you needed.”

“No, I suppose not.”

There’s a beat of silence. “You are going to have to come back,” says Hannibal.

“That would be very helpful. If it’s no trouble.”

“It is no trouble.”

Another loaded silence follows while they stare at each other and Will finds that he can’t quite bring himself to break it. *How can silence be loaded?* he thinks. But it is. *Loaded like a gun*; *something with ammunition – something lethal and explosive*. Then he frowns to himself at the needless melodrama of the image. It’s not like anything’s really happened after all; not really. Has it?

“Thank you, Dr Lecter,” he eventually manages to say.

“You are welcome, Inspector Graham.”

Will holds out his hand and Hannibal shakes it, lingering on for a just a fraction too long. His grip is firm but warm, the long fingers coiling around Will’s, and the latter makes no immediate attempt to move away.

“And do please remember what I have said,” adds Hannibal. Now he’s looking directly at Will again, gaze very focussed and intense. His eyes are striking: deep and fathomless. Bright-edged flints, the colour of dark amber. “Jack Crawford will doubtless hold open several doors for you – do not to be too eager to step through. It is dark on the other side and who knows what waits in the shadows?”

“I understand,” says Will, even though he’s not sure he does.

“Then I shall see you very soon,” says Hannibal. And just like that Will is out on the pavement again, drawing in a few lungful’s of air and trying to work out what exactly just happened. On an impulse he turns round, half expecting (perhaps even hoping) to see the angular face and fathomless eyes staring back at him through the window – but the panes reflect only the empty sky and give nothing away. He hesitates for a few more seconds; in the corner of his eye he thinks he sees the heavy damask curtain move but when he glances at it there’s nothing there. He still stares at it anyway, exchanging silent recognition. Deep down, in a muted cautious part of himself, there’s a sense that something has shifted; something ineffable, like a change below the surface of water that remains smooth. What though? He doesn’t know. At any rate there’s nothing more to be done here. He glances at the window again, wary and watchful, and then takes another deep breath and walks away.

*****

Will spends the remainder of the day soliciting the opinion of other sundry doctors – dutifully trudging from one doorstep to another and negotiating a successive series of scandalized housemaids – although beyond announcing that the situation is ‘*shocking’* and ‘*terrible’* (which Will already knows) and that the police really ought to be doing more (which he can’t bring himself to disagree with either, despite feeling slightly disloyal) none of the Chief Superintendent’s putatively esteemed medical men have anything particularly constructive to offer. Dr Cunningham inspects the photographs and autopsy reports and announces that there can be no reasonable doubt that the murderer is a demented medical practitioner (“Physician heal thyself!” shrieks Dr Cunningham; “Yes…quite,” says Will); whereas Dr Scholes

maintains that the mutilations have been conducted by someone lacking even an elementary level of training or knowledge – and that a butcher or abattoir worker could be expected to display a more competent grasp of anatomy. Dr Holland proclaims himself of too sensitive a disposition to examine the materials at all, but is extremely keen to hear Will's opinions about the Civil War and whether or not Abraham Lincoln was as affable in person as was generally reported in the press. Will patiently explains that he was seven when the latter was assassinated (and even before that could not claim to be on terms of particular intimacy), but Dr Holland seems reluctant to accept it and keeps repeating the same stupid questions as if phrasing them slightly differently is going to finally elicit the answers he wants; and Will has no option but to nod and smile while cherishing a fleeting yet highly satisfying fantasy of bludgeoning him into silence with the pompous plaster bust of Julius Caesar that's tantalisingly close to hand on the desk.

Will doesn't drop his hat at any of the other houses; or flush; or be shocked into silent, wondering incomprehension in the face of careful little verbal parries; and none of his other interviewees call him an alchemist or stare at him with dark, considering eyes. But none of them can offer insights that could approach anything close to being called 'helpful' (as opposed to the more concise collective adjective, which would be calling them 'shit') and at four o'clock Will returns to Scotland Yard and appraises Jack Crawford of his lack of progress. "I suppose that was to be expected," sighs Jack; and it's not entirely clear whether he means the doctors, the general situation, or Will himself. At five o'clock Will suffers being introduced to the other detectives assigned to the Whitechapel case, who gape at him as if he's an exhibit in a glass case (at least it begins with this degree of polite scrutiny; by the end it feels more like being a caged beast in a zoo) and at six o'clock he returns to his lodgings and collapses on the sofa in his room in a defeated, exhausted heap. At seven o'clock his landlady appears and kindly asks him whether he'd like a meal now, and if so if he'd prefer to have it brought up or to join her in the kitchen downstairs. Will opts for the former; not because he doesn't like her (he does) or deplores her company, but because he doesn't want to inflict his black mood on either herself or the other lodger. "Right you are Mr Graham," she says; and he wants to ask her to call him Will but is afraid to in case it might be considered improper. Not that he can really envisage calling her by her Christian name, even if he knew what it was.

He gathers that the landlady, Mrs Bloom, owns both this house and two others like it and supposes in turn (given the ostensible absence of a Mr Bloom) that she must be a widow; even though she doesn't wear a ring and never mentions her husband, deceased or otherwise. The second lodger, Miss Verger, inherited property from her brother and is what is known as 'a woman of independent means.' Although the latter could clearly afford to maintain her own home, she and Mrs Bloom appear to dote upon one another and he assumes that the arrangement is more for social than financial reasons; that, and the fact two women in the house can act as a form of mutual chaperonage for the presence of male lodgers. In this respect he's rather ashamed of the fact that he finds them both extremely good-looking and can't stop himself from occasionally admiring them, peering cautiously over the top of his coffee cup or round the side of the newspaper, before feeling guilty for how inappropriate such furtive appreciation is. They'd caught him doing it once and he'd had to stammer out a series of blushing apologies, but they'd just laughed merrily and told him not to mind. In this respect it's extremely pleasant to be around people who aren't constantly primed to be outraged and offended by him. Perhaps he should go downstairs after all? Then he

remembers what he's spent all day doing and feels that it's almost profane to go and exchange social pleasantries with two such serenely lovely women with the autopsy photos swirling round his head; not to mention the fact that he's ultimately going to be required to abandon the (relative) safety of even his own head in order to climb inside that of the person responsible for them.

For an awful few seconds Will feels like he could actually cry. Then he makes a vigorous effort to pull himself together and instead opts to spend time with Mrs Bloom and Miss Verger vicariously by leaving the door open so he can hear them laughing and talking from downstairs. "Oh, you!" Mrs Bloom is saying. She sounds so fond. Will can't remember the last time someone spoke to him like that, with such warmth and affectionate regard. Has anyone? Possibly his mother, although he can scarcely remember her. In fact he's never quite sure to what extent the memories are genuine or simply carefully crafted inventions to bolster a version of his life that he would like to have believed really happened. Nevertheless his vivid imagination can immediately sketch out the exact look on Mrs Bloom's face as she's speaking the words: how she'll be smiling at Miss Verger, possibly with a tender touch on the latter's shoulder; the way her pretty brown eyes will be crinkling at the edges with the force of the smile. Dr Lecter (*Hannibal*) had brown eyes, albeit of a darker shade, although even Will's imagination can't conjure an image of them creasing in a similar way. From listening to the lilting voices he finally discovers that Mrs Bloom's name is Alana, which he thinks suits her: elegant-sounding with a playful inflection at the end, and a nice complement to the associations of blossom and blush attached to her surname. He was right though, he'll *never* be able to call her that.

At nine o'clock Will goes to bed. This is unusually early for him, being something of a night owl through both habit and inclination; but even if the strain of the day hadn't completely exhausted him, sleep would still have appealed on the grounds of the mindless, insensate oblivion it promises to offer. In this respect escapism is a constant siren call; in fact only yesterday he spotted a small druggist on the next street with a discrete sign in the window assuring late-night dispensing of laudanum, but had forced himself to avert his eyes and quicken his pace. It's so terribly tempting but the risk of addiction is likewise so terribly high. In Baltimore he'd known several colleagues who'd grown dependent: the florid manias and crippling depressions, the treacly slurred speech and garbled ranting, the torpor and restless agitation. A drug of contraries. Even so…Will thinks now of the blissful escape lying inside the small glass vials and repeats the oft-pledged promise to himself: if it gets too bad – if it gets unbearable – *then* you can.

Will rummages around in his trunk (still not properly unpacked) to locate an old linen shirt which is comforting in its pliability and softness then gets into bed and stares at the ceiling – upon which he realises, with typical perversity, that he's no longer tired. Oh *God*, how is that even possible…it's so unfair. The silence and dimness feel oppressive in the uniquely barren way an unfamiliar sleeping space always manages to be: condemned to stare into oblivion while listening to the pulsing throb and drone of your own heartbeat. '*Oblivion,'* Will amends contemptuously; *for God's sake get a grip on yourself and stop being so dramatic*. A drink would probably be helpful but he doesn't have any alcohol in the room, so makes an executive decision to jerk off instead – like, right *now*, Goddammit – to try and help himself relax. He actually feels slightly depraved considering such a thing with Mrs Bloom and Miss

Verger only a few rooms away, but consoles himself with the notion that they're so bold and free-thinking they probably couldn't care less even if they did know.

Not that they *are* going to know, thinks Will with a flinch of mortification. To be on the safe side he wedges the door closed, then opens the window as an added precaution so that any noise he might end up making will be obscured by sounds from the street. Actually that works out quite well: the cool night air feels pleasing on his flushed, damp skin once the shirt's been removed; and whereas the gloom was oppressive before, the light from the smouldering remains of the fire now lends a softly sensuous intimacy. Oh God, he's so hard. That's…unexpected. His bed is pushed into the corner, and on an impulse he props himself upright so his back's resting against the angle where the two walls meet which makes it easier to stretch out and open his legs further apart. In fact there's something rather containing and comforting about being boxed in like this. He could almost be pressed against someone's chest: the snug, solid confine of the walls against his shoulders could be someone's arms wrapped round him; someone who was strong enough to take his weight; who would bear him up and wouldn't let him fall. He tries to imagine it: they'd be taller than Will so he'd be able to tuck his head beneath their chin as their hands stroked down the length of his arms, their fingers tangling in his. He could arch up against them as hard as he wanted to and they wouldn't mind: there would be a sense of containment about it, of being sheltered; a capacity to cradle and enfold all the shards and fragments of Will's splintered self. Their skin would feel so *warm*. And they'd murmur words of praise and encouragement the entire time in a voice that was low-pitched and sincere; their lips would brush against his forehead as they slid their fingers over his…they'd want this as much as he does: want to help him touch himself, help him make it feel good. And oh it does, it feels *good*. He grips onto his cock almost feverishly, his hand speeding up as he tips his head back, dimly aware of how slick and smooth it feels and the tacky, viscous noise of skin thrusting against hot, damp skin. Not that it's the only sound, because while he's usually very quiet when he does this, he's now making frantic gasping noises interspersed with "oh…oh yes, *yes*," and even the occasional "please" – which doesn't even make any sense because there's no one here to implore to. Only this imaginary lover, this Person Unknown; although he's not consciously aware of imagining a particular face, and doesn't call out anyone's name. It feels like every single nerve is spasming, each muscle taut and strained, and it's almost close to being too much if not for a vague thought, hovering and half-formed yet oddly insistent, that it's *nowhere near enough*.

Will quivers and grips the bedframe to stop himself pitching over, arching his back as he feels the first ripple of pleasure running through his body and finally letting out a long, low moan as his hips give a last desperate jolt and he starts to come. Afterwards he collapses onto the bed, trembling slightly at the intensity of the sensation and drawing his knees up towards his chest. His hair is tangling into his eyes (annoying) and when he pushes it away he's aware that his hands are shaking. It's too cold, that's why: now the night air is no longer balmy and the firelight has ceased to be soothing and all that's happened is that the window needs closing and the grate watered down. In fact now the initial glow has worn off there's no avoiding the fact that he actually feels worse than before. It's as if he's done something pathetic and sordid and ought to be ashamed, even though he's always scorned those moralizing pamphlets about the perils of 'self-abuse' (or even the coyly suggestive treatises on 'self-love'...for God's sake). No, fuck that, it's not shame; it's simply that he feels – lonely. Yes, that's it. It's the painful awareness of how pining and solitary his circumstances

are. The physicality isn't enough by itself, simply highlighting the absence of anyone to experience it with.

The recognition of this impulse (or, indeed, the lack of it) is rather startling and he isn't entirely sure what to do with it. In fact the sensation is like a fledgling in a nest – newly-hatched, gaping-mouthed and dependent – which contemplates wings while never being fully able to fly. Emotional intimacy, solidarity…love. It's not as if he can even *really* imagine what it would be like. Will's only knowledge of love is derived from novels, songs, and illustrations on chocolate boxes and playbills: an abstract concept to be examined rather than a felt sensation. Something that happens to other people. Sighing slightly he makes a perfunctory attempt to clean himself up, then pulls the shirt back on and climbs into bed so he can resume staring at the ceiling: an exhausted, depleted replica of how he was before, as if the last 10 minutes never happened. Even 'self-love' – ludicrously euphemistic as it is – becomes an unknown quantity. It's a sobering thought, but true nonetheless. Because how can you truly accomplish it when you don't know how it feels to *like* yourself…let alone love?

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Will eventually achieves his ambition of falling asleep, except the hoped-for respite doesn't materialize and instead he's stalked through his dreams by crawling things with dripping mouths and grasping clawed hands that scratch his face and tug at his clothes: composite creatures made of breath and bone and skin and shadows. He screams at them to leave him alone, even though they've never listened in the past and there's no reason for them to do so now. So tireless in their pursuit…the entire stretch of the Atlantic isn't sufficient to deter them. And then one of them, bolder or more reckless, or simply more impatient than the rest, succeeds in darting out and seizing his wrist, at which point he really does scream.

"Mr Graham," a female voice is saying. "Mr Graham." The tone is kind and soothing; vaguely familiar, which means…oh *God*.

Will jolts upright, fitful and lurching as a marionette with its strings cut, and only just remembering (too late) to let go of the hand that until seconds ago was clasping his. "I'm terribly sorry," he says miserably. "I really am. I didn't hurt you did I?"

"Not at all," replies Mrs Bloom. "I should be the one to apologise; I startled you so clumsily. Margot always tells me I am too precipitate." This is said with a gentle smile: the rebuke (if such it is) is obviously an affectionate one. Margot, then; is that Miss Verger?

Will runs his fingers through his hair, suddenly feeling horribly self-conscious. What's she doing here anyway? He has a fleeting, ridiculous hope that she might be about to proposition him in some way (then promptly feels hugely ashamed for even considering it) and Mrs Bloom crinkles her kind eyes at him and places her lamp on the bedside table. There's something rather serene in the manner with which she does it, and the image makes him smile in spite of himself. "The Lady With Lamp," he says wryly, nodding in its direction. The endeavours of Miss Nightingale were known even in America, and a verse of a poem he learnt at school comes unbidden into his mind: *Lo! in that house of misery/A lady with a lamp I see/Pass through the glimmering gloom/And flit from room to room.*

This makes her smile too. “I’m hardly a ministering angel I’m afraid, Mr Graham,” she says. She rolls her eyes playfully as if the notion amuses her, although Will can’t help thinking that she would probably make an extremely good one if she wanted to. “I truly am sorry, I wish I didn’t have to disturb you, but there’s a messenger downstairs; you’re wanted at Scotland Yard. Immediately.”

Now that he’s paying attention, Will is immediately aware of raised male voices in the street below – pitched high and pulsating with alarm – as well as the unmistakable shriek of a police whistle punctuated with the sound of running footsteps. He promptly feels his heart sink. It really does; as if the sick plunge of despair has the capacity to transcend metaphor and manifest as a defeated, plummeting sensation in the chest. “What…now?” he says unhappily.

“This very moment.” She’s looking at him with her head slightly to the side, although the expression is one of compassion rather than pity. “Forgive me asking Mr Graham, but do you often have such bad dreams?”

“No,” lies Will. “Not really.” He tries to think of a plausible excuse. “I expect it’s the investigation.” Well that, at least, is plausible – it’s *more* than plausible. “As well as being unsettled from the journey,” he adds, a bit lamely.

She’s still looking; she’s an astute woman – she knows he’s not telling the truth and obviously wants to offer comfort in a way that won’t embarrass him. “If there’s anything I can do?” she says after a delicate pause. “Perhaps some extra candles for your lamp? I believe that soft lighting can sometimes expedite calmer sleep.”

Like a child’s nightlight, thinks Will gloomily. It’s going to take more than a lot more than a lamp with him, but at least the additional candles would mean being able to read for longer than he’s currently able to do. “That’s very kind,” he says, because it is. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“Please add it to the rent, won’t you?” The sense of obligation would be too uncomfortable otherwise.

She just smiles at him without confirming whether she will or she won’t, then smooths down the edges of her scarlet shawl (a pleasing contrast against her dark hair and pale skin) and retrieves her lamp from the bedside table. “I’ll leave you now Mr Graham,” she says. How calming her voice is; he wishes he could ask her to come and read to him, it would be far more soothing than candles. “Shall I tell the messenger to wait?”

“Thank you, yes, if you would. I’ll be down as quickly as I can.”

She nods in acquiescence and then moves to go, but at the last moment hesitates by the door. Her face in the guttering candlelight looks slightly unearthly. “Mr Graham?”

“Yes?”

“That message…” She hesitates. “There’s been another one hasn’t there?”

Will stares at the bedspread for a few moments. It looks as if it's been hand-worked: meticulously embroidered cupids with sheaves of roses. Little bleeding hearts. "Yes," he says slowly when he glances up. "Yes I'm afraid there almost certainly has."

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to friendlypotato for making this gorgeous drawing of Malana in their Victorian gear that I hope you'll all love as much as I do :-D

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scotland Yard is in complete chaos when Will arrives: various figures in assorted states of panic and disarray, dashing and darting and snapping and arguing, all seemingly to very little purpose, and all illuminated under the sickly flare of the gaslights. He hovers for a few moments by the door, briefly overwhelmed by the fateful, frenetic urgency of it all. On reflection, it bears more than a passing resemble to the notorious Bedlam hospital; or, to employ a more refined and loftier metaphor, Milton's Pandemonium. Will falters for a few seconds, trying to work out where such an unlikely analogy came from, before remembering that he'd seen a volume of *Paradise Lost* in Dr Lecter's room. It had been bound in calfskin leather with gold facings; expensive looking yet, like so many of the latter's other belongings, announcing its costly provenance in a tasteful and under-stated way. Will frowns slightly, allowing his mind to wander back to the interview, before being abruptly wrenched into the present by the bustling appearance of Jack Crawford; closely followed by a young woman with thick chestnut hair, a pale blue bonnet trimmed with imitation roses (slightly crushed around the edges), and an expression of anguished distress and disbelief etched into every feature as if with a knife. In fact her face is so striking in its misery that it's actually her who Will focusses on more than Jack: there's almost something Biblical about such profusely haunted sorrow. She could be a figure in a Passion play, howling in the streets with clawed hands beseeching to the sky. A painting called *Lamentation*.

"Inspector Graham," snaps Jack without further preamble. "You took your time."

"I'm sorry Mr Crawford," replies Will through gritted teeth. "I got here as fast as possible." *Which I'll have you know, you miserable old bastard, in the middle of the night, half-dead with exhaustion, and in an unfamiliar city was actually pretty fucking fast*.

Jack gives a small flick of the hand, obviously unimpressed by Will's estimation of what's possible and what isn't, and then gestures to the girl at his side. "I want to introduce you to Mrs…"

"*Miss*," says the girl in a strained voice, tense and taut enough to snap.

"My apologies, to *Miss* Emma Morris. She reported her friend, Miss…"

"Mrs!" says Emma despairingly. "Can't you even get her name right sir? It was Mrs. She was married once."

Jack looks a bit despairing himself. "*Mrs* Charlotte Tate was reported missing a few hours ago. Mrs Tate is, um, she…well, she was known to have frequented public houses…" he trails off tactfully, and Will immediately recognises this as a sign of just how serious things have become – that a missing prostitute now warrants a direct communication with the head of Scotland Yard.

“I understand,” he says quickly to try and spare Miss Morris any further indignities on behalf of her friend.

“We despatched officers out immediately of course,” says Jack, somewhat defensively. He’s obviously already thinking ahead to what he’s going to say to the press and the politicians; the justifications he’s going to have to make. “Unfortunately it wasn’t…the outcome we would have hoped for. Sergeant Rossiter made the discovery half an hour ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” says Will to Emma.

“Dr Price is on his way,” Jacks add meaningfully, obviously not wanting to bandy around words like *body* or *autopsy*.

Will nods to show he understands. “You have the facilities here?”

“No.” Jack lowers his voice and leans inwards so Emma can’t hear him. “It’ll be conducted at the City Mortuary; we leave in 15 minutes, so I want you ready to go.” He raises his voice again. “Miss Morris, can I have anything brought for you? Perhaps a cup of tea?”

“No. No tea.”

Jack falters again, at a loss of further possible sources of restoration now the tea has been rejected. Really, it’s a shame that he can’t offer her the brandy in his desk – if Will wasn’t present he probably would, but he’s concerned that acknowledging its presence might look unprofessional. “Talk to Inspector Graham here Miss Morris,” he finally says with the distinct air of somebody who’s trying to palm off a difficulty. “He’s very experienced with this…type of thing. I need to speak with the Chief Superintendent,” he adds to Will. “Meet me in the foyer in 15 minutes.”

“I’ve told them what I know,” says Emma shrilly. “That man with the beard and the hateful, scowling face.” Will glances at her sympathetically, easily able to imagine what the officer’s manner with her would have been.

“Yes, you did very well,” replies Jack in a soothing voice. “You don’t have to say anything else unless you want to. Inspector Graham – 15 minutes.” He promptly strides off, leaving Will wondering what the hell he can possibly say to this distraught and devastated woman. In the end he takes recourse in the obvious and repeats his condolences. Not that he expects her to care; why should she? What conceivable difference can it make, how sorry he is; how *terribly* sorry. No difference at all. Sure enough she whips round, the little false roses in her bonnet trembling in an almost unbearably pitiful way, and rounds on him as a convenient outlet for all her frustrated misery. He lets her do it without complaint; happy to be of at least some help, however slight.

“They’re useless!” she says. “The police – *useless*. What good are they?”

“They’re…” he hesitates; this seems a bit cowardly, even if he has only recently joined the effort. “*We’re* doing the best we can.” He deliberately softens his tone, trying to indicate that he’s not attempting to contradict her as opposed to offering some reassurance that this man, this Jack the Ripper, is going to be brought to justice if humanly possible.

“Not good enough though, is it? Nowhere near good enough!”

“No,” agrees Will bleakly.

“If this was happening in the West End rather than the East End…if this was being done to *rich* people…”

“…I know.”

“You don’t!” screams Emma. “You don’t know *nothing*!”

Will wants to tell her again how sorry he is – for being of no use, for knowing nothing, for being powerless to undo what’s been done – but suspects it would just enflame her further so in the end remains silent. Then he wants to pat her shoulder, but again resists because it might be construed as improper; and given her previous treatment by the desk sergeant, he feels it very important to accord her every possible show of respect. People are turning round to stare at them now: bristly, bearded, disapproving faces of assorted policemen and sundry hangers-on who probably shouldn’t be here at all but have found the lure of sensationalism to be too tempting to resist. Drawn to misery and morbid horror like moths to a flame, safely enjoying the spectacle of someone else’s nightmare. He wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a journalist in there somewhere.

Oh, fuck them. Who cares anyway? He turns back to Emma. “I wish I could do something for you,” he says sincerely. “I’m so sorry that I can’t.”

He’s expecting her to scream at him again, but instead she just sniffs then fumbles in her reticule for a tiny scrap of a handkerchief that she proceeds to scrub across her face in the artless manner of a child. It’s strikingly different to most of the women he knows, so patrician and formal by virtue of their social status, and who would never feel able to act in such a guileless, natural way in front of a stranger. He smiles at her again in a way that he hopes conveys compassion and won’t be mistaken for patronage or condescension.

Emma replaces the handkerchief and then peers up at Will from underneath the feathery edges of her fringe. He can’t help noticing how blue her eyes are: scarlet-rimmed and brimming with unshed tears, but still the same delicate shade as columbines. “You’re kind,” she replies quietly. “It’s good of you to be so kind. I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

“Please don’t apologise.”

“Most people have been kind. They…they did their best.” She waves her hand towards the back of the room. “That other policeman. Who was he?”

“Which policeman?”

“The nice one.”

Will struggles to remember any nice policeman.

“The one you was talking to,” prompts Emma.

“Oh. Mr Crawford.”

“He was kind to me. He didn’t really understand, but at least he tried. But he didn’t…it’s just…” Her voice briefly hitches and then spirals into a wail. “She was my *friend.* I should have told her not to go out. I saw the papers, I *knew*.”

“You couldn’t really have known,” says Will firmly. “No one could.” It’s a state of being he’s not entirely unfamiliar with himself: the awareness of knowing and yet not-knowing. Ambivalent nihilism. “This is in no way your fault,” he adds. “And it wasn’t Mrs Tate’s either.”

She glances up, and when she speaks her voice is tremulous. “You really believe that don’t you sir?”

“Of course I do; I *know* it.” And that, at least, is one thing he *does* know: that the fault and responsibility for this obscene waste of a life lies with one person, and one person only. “We’ll catch him,” he adds after a pause. “We’re doing everything we can.” The problem, of course, being that there is really very little they can do. But what little there is, is going to be done; including tearing his own sense of self – sanctity, sanity, sensibility – into tiny tatters if it can be of service. “*Everything*,” he repeats.

Emma gives him a very faint smile as if she understands. Perhaps she does? She’s obviously someone who knows about the reality of life; how ugly, relentless and unforgiving it can be…and Will promptly decides that he’s going to pretend that this is the case, simply because of how wonderful it would be to believe – even if just for a few seconds, even if it’s not really true – that *someone* is capable of understanding him. That he is understandable, and therefore not beyond all reach of hope or help. Fleetingly he thinks back to yesterday’s interview: *“You are quite the alchemist aren’t you?”* Then he gives Emma a faint smile of his own in return, and for a few moments they stand there united in a silent, possibly imaginary, confederacy of shared understanding and silent suffering before Will’s attention is snagged by the sight of Jack Crawford – resplendent and slightly ludicrous in an elaborate hat and expensive overcoat – being accosted in the doorway by a burly thickset man whose face has turned an alarming shade of angry red. “It’s an *outrage*!” the latter is declaring. “A damned outrage!”

He’s clutching a soiled newspaper in one large paw-like hand which he occasionally brandishes at Jack whenever he wishes to emphasise his point; not unlike, thinks Will, someone waving a stick at a dog. The headline (‘*Police Incompetence: New Disgrace Emerges*’) is clearly visible from where he’s standing, as is the title of the paper: *The Tattle Crime*. It’s an odd choice for a periodical – *Tattle* – inspiring, as it does, associations of hearsay and rumour. Not exactly a name to inspire confidence in the veracity or respectability of the material; although perhaps that’s partly the point? Nevertheless Will’s (guilty) amusement at seeing Jack Crawford being thoroughly routed by a member of the Great British Public armed with a grimy tabloid paper quickly turns to concern when he takes a closer look at the angry man’s posture and positioning and realises that this has a clear potential to get out of hand very quickly. These suspicions are confirmed when the latter seizes hold of Jack’s shoulder and roughly spins him round, attempting some kind of choke hold that speaks of a certain brutal skill honed through years of street brawls. Will sighs

inwardly then darts forward, neatly vaulting over the desk in order to grab the man and wrestle his arms behind his back before forcibly dragging him off.

"That's *enough*," he says sharply. Then he realizes that he has absolutely no idea what the British procedure for apprehension is, or what sort of thing he should say next. *Now you scoundrel, kindly desist such tomfoolery in the name of Her Majesty the Queen?* The British are so polite…perhaps he should be referring to the assailant as sir?

Jack Crawford splutters angrily in the manner of a kettle coming up to the boil (and for an awful moment Will thinks he might actually start laughing at the sight and sound of it, if for no better reason than to dispel some of his own nervous tension) before two other police officers come rushing over, yapping like dogs and loudly announcing that they were *just* about to intervene themselves – and would have done too Mr Crawford, sir – if the American fellow hadn't gone leaping over the desk like that. The word '*leaping*' is uttered in an unmistakably disparaging tone; as if, thinks Will, he'd just taken a piss on the desk as opposed to jumping over it in the service of preventing Jack Crawford's head and body being forcibly separated from one another.

"Now, you come along with me sir," says the older of the two policeman to the bearded man. Oh God, he really *did* say sir. Will's eyebrows shoot skyward in amused incredulity. He obediently steps aside and allows the two officers to take hold of the assailant, who has temporarily been shocked into silence at such an unexpected intervention (via transatlantic desk leaping) but has now rallied again and is preparing to renew his stream of angry invective.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves!" he bellows as he's led away. "All of you! Sitting in here, getting fat on the back of the working man's taxes while some maniac is…" The rest is lost as the officers drag him down the stairs towards the small collection of cells beneath the station house, and Will's lips twitch again because Jack Crawford, while not exactly *fat*…

"Thank you Graham," says the latter, promptly interrupting this interesting train of thought. "Excellent responses there. Very impressive."

"You're welcome."

"I confess I didn't foresee that at all. We get all manner of angry individuals in here but they seldom become violent." He frowns, as if suddenly struck by the incongruity of it. "In fact I don't recall a similar situation ever happening before."

"No, I suppose not. Common sense alone ought to safeguard against such a thing in a police station."

"Well, you did a splendid job," says Jack heartily. "Very good indeed. You're obviously very adept at observing and anticipating people."

Will just shrugs and smiles, while secretly wondering what the latter would say if he confided the real thought that's going through his head: that even a short conversation is usually enough to make him want to punch Jack himself so it was hardly surprising that someone else

obviously felt the same. “What’s going to happen to him?” is all he says, nodding at the departing back of the angry bearded man.

“Oh, we’ll caution him and let him go I expect,” says Jack. “No sense in formally charging him, the press will get hold of it and turn him into a martyr.” He looks depressed at the very thought of it; no doubt he’s already imaging the caricatures of himself in the less-salubrious daily papers. “Are you ready to leave now?”

“Whenever you like.”

“You’ve attended similar procedures before I take it?”

“Yes, on numerous occasions.”

“Then you know what to expect.”

“Of a fashion. Of course no two are ever going to be exactly alike.”

“No,” agrees Jack gloomily. “But up until now one would have a general idea of what one was going to see. But *this*…this isn’t like anything else. I tell you very freely Mr Graham that I’ve been a police officer for over 20 years, and not a single one prepared me for what this individual is doing. When the details of the last murder were reported in the press, someone wrote a letter to *The Times* declaring that the investigation didn’t need a detective, it needed a priest. And on bad days, I’m not entirely disposed to disagree.”

*****

Will begins shivering like a whippet once they’re outside, his thin overcoat providing only minimal protection from the icy air that seems determined to insinuate its way through every piece of clothing, sharp and cutting as a knife. The night is additionally unfeasibly murky as well as unfeasibly cold, and Will stares incredulously at the thick, sulphurous curtain of dense, dirty mist that saturates everything.

“The infamous London fog,” says Jack as if reading his mind. “We call them ‘pea-soupers.’ You might think it’s merely unseasonable weather, but it isn’t. It’s smoke: coal burning. Hearth, home and industry, as they say. You don’t have trouble with your chest do you?”

“No.” His lungs, at least, are one of the few things he *doesn’t* have trouble with.

“Good.” Jack nods approvingly, as if strong lungs are second only to virtuous character. “It can prove fatal for people with respiratory disease.”

Will smiles thinly and turns his collar up as high as possible against the cold. The observation is doing nothing to elevate his mood, rather adding to his growing impression that London is a lean, hungry, predatory place: somewhere in which men with blood-soaked knives prowl undetected through the streets, where policemen are attacked without censure or consequence in their own station house and where the air itself attempts to choke one to death. Naturally he doesn’t confide any of this, but simply thrusts his hands into his pockets and prepares to follow Jack as they begin their grim pilgrimage through the silent streets. The dim, shadowy

gloom doesn't abate, but at least the way is lit by flickering gaslights and a sliver of moon is just about visible, gleaming like a piece of bright bone in the sky: rimey and raw-looking and slightly vaporous from all the fog.

Neither of them speak during the journey. Jack strides ahead with his shoulders hunched and a furrowed frown line running between his eyebrows like a dagger while Will retreats into miserable contemplation of what they're going to find at the other end and wishes there was some way of prolonging the inevitable confrontation with it. To him the journey can't possibly last too long, but they seem to reach their destination soon enough. The City Mortuary appears suitably forbidding from the outside: grey and soot-stained with numerous blank windows that glitter in the moonlight like blind eyes in dead faces. An anxious-looking police constable is waiting for them by the gates with a lantern and ushers them down the driveway and into the foyer, opening the main doors with a set of cumbersome rusty keys that screech in the lock in an obligingly sinister way. Like Jack the officer is extremely silent and Will wonders why nobody is speaking before deciding that – of course – it's fear and apprehension that's rendering them all mute. In fact the sense of dread is palpable, heavy and plangent as the fog.

Once inside they're soon met by two other men, one tall and one short, and whose appearance manages to muster the first smile that Will's ever seen cranked out of Jack's stern face. The latter marches ahead to greet them, simultaneously dismissing the police constable with an imperious wave of the hand, and leaving Will trailing rather awkwardly in his wake and wishing he could join the young officer in escaping this awful place.

No such luck – of course. "Come here," calls Jack over his shoulder as if Will is a dog, "let me introduce you. This is our Divisional Police Surgeon Dr James Price; and his assistant, Mr Brian Zeller. Jim, this is Inspector Will Graham from…"

"From the United States," replies Price. "Yes I know all about it. Behave yourself in my lab Mr Graham, respect the fact that no one is allowed to terrorize Mr Zeller except myself, and make no references to post-mortem examinations as either ghoulish or irreligious and I am sure we are destined to become the very best of friends."

"Irreligious?" asks Will, somewhat surprised. "I assumed Europe was more enlightened than that?"

"Perhaps on the continent," says Price in a voice positively dripping with disdain, "but attitudes here remained *distinctly* conservative for years. It's enormously frustrating. Refusing to recognise pathology as the science it is has hindered advancement in a very unfortunate way." This is obviously an oft-repeated complaint, and Zeller nods emphatically as various intervals as if to reiterate the key points.

"You seem to have advanced in spite of it," says Will amicably. "I've read one of your monographs."

"Oh?" Price's eyebrows shoot so high up his forehead they are in temporary danger of disappearing into his hairline. "Which one?"

"On the discrepancies between homicidal and suicidal wounds."

“And?” asks Price beadily.

“Very impressive. In fact we could have done with something similar in the States last year. A case came to trial with a man accused of slitting his wife’s throat; his defence was that she’d been depressed for some time and had taken her own life. My conclusion was the same as yours – that an incision deep enough to damage the spine was unlikely to be self-inflicted.”

Price looks pleased. “Yes, there are a number of important distinctions. Placement to the hyoid bone, for example.”

“Quite. Although if you reissue it, I would suggest you consider extending your discussion of defensive injuries.”

“Yes I agree with you there; it could benefit from some expansion. In contrast, my analysis of skin serration…”

Jack clears his throat. “All right Mr Crawford,” says Price. “Point taken; lead on. Not that I imagine any of us are particularly eager to begin. You’re more knowledgeable on these matters than I thought you’d be,” he adds over his shoulder to Will.

“I’ve read *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*.”

“Which edition?”

“The seventh,” says Will; and Price nods approvingly.

The rest of the walk to the necropsy room is mostly made in silence, everyone with their hands in their pockets and eyes cast to the floor, although while Price and Zeller occasionally exchange snatches of conversation in a low undertone Will doesn’t attempt the same with Jack. What is there, after all, to possibly say? He frowns unhappily to himself, absent-mindedly gnawing on his thumb nail, and barely noticing that the others have come to a halt and Price is unlocking the door until Jack sharply calls at him to stop walking and come back to join them. The lab itself is unremarkable, little more than a miserable facsimile of the numerous ones (far too many) that he’s inhabited in the past: a gaping, gloomy and glacially cold chamber, high-ceilinged with a bare stone floor, and replete with cheap porcelain tiles that would once have been cream but are now a dirty off-grey colour. The large chute in the corner, along with the assorted ceramic and wrought-iron contraptions, give it the appearance of a workshop: a factory to manufacture the murdered and deceased. Then Jack gives a discreet cough and all four pairs of eyes automatically turn to the wooden table in the centre, long-legged yet sturdy, on which the coroner’s assistant has already placed the body of Charlotte Tate, respectfully covered with a green baize cloth.

“Gentlemen,” says Price grimly.

There’s a collective intake of breath when he removes the covering. Will runs his hand across his face then looks away.

“Good God,” mutters Jack, seemingly to himself.

Hardly evidence for a good God, thinks Will, a bit wildly. He drags in a deep lungful of air in an attempt to steady himself and briefly pictures Emma Morris's young, artless, devastated face to fuel his sense of purpose: the necessity of doing what needs to be done, and which no one else can do. Briefly a snatch of dialogue from a Shakespeare production he once saw in Baltimore comes back to him: "*Screw your courage to the sticking place*." He can't remember the name of the play, although he remembers the actress and how the character finally went mad; remembers that there was a lot of stage blood – far more viscous and scarlet than the real thing – and the constant emphasis on fate, frailty and moral constriction. To his left he's vaguely aware of Price sighing heavily and beginning to assemble the instruments he needs; Zeller to the right, primed with a clipboard and pencil as he prepares to take notes.

"More extreme than the previous victim," says Price after a pause.

"Yes." Jack's voice is a striking blend of anger and resignation; one extreme to the other. "Far more. I would hardly have thought it possible."

"Because he's escalating."

"What's that Mr Graham?"

"What he did previously is no longer sufficient. He needs more; it's what moves him to do this in the first place. It's his *design*. The mutilations are becoming worse because he needs greater violence to obtain the necessary emotional satisfaction."

"He isn't *necessarily*," says Jack, who believes in hedging his bets.

"Yes he is," says Will, who doesn't. "It's very customary amongst killers of this type." He can't bring himself to confide how else he knows; how he *feels* it to be the case. "Those injuries would have bled profusely," he says instead. "Was there a large amount of blood at the scene?"

Jack falters. "To be honest I'm not sure. If so, the sergeant didn't mention it."

"Well someone needs to go and check," replies Will irritably. "Information like that is *essential*. It can tell us whether she was murdered where she was found or attacked elsewhere." He closes his eyes and rubs his hands over his temples, occasionally wincing, and Jack glances at him with concern.

"No damage to the vertebral canal," Price is now saying. "Do you have that Mr Zeller? Organs of circulation and respiration are…"

Will snaps opens his eyes. Flinches. Turns pale. "The throat wound was inflicted first," he says abruptly.

Price hesitates and then peers closer. "Why yes…I believe you're right," he replies after a pause.

“He bludgeons them to unconsciousness and then cuts their throats to incapacitate them. The remaining mutilations occur post-mortem.”

“Agreed. *Very* good Mr Graham.” Price glances sadly at the little figure on the table. “Poor soul. She would have died in seconds from the injury to the throat. At least she wouldn’t have known what was happening.”

“And he’s right-handed,” adds Will. “The depth and direction of the injury makes that very clear.”

“Yes, thank you, we’d already established that.” Price turns to Zeller. “Add that to the report, if you please Mr Zeller: independent verification of handedness. The last I heard Dr Chilton was *still* insisting on him being left-handed.” He gives a snort of contempt then returns to the bleak task of cataloguing the various wounds. “There’s heavy bruising to the face and neck – virtually identical to what we observed on the previous victims. Abdominal parietes severely damaged. Pelvic and abdominal viscera likewise damaged but…” he hesitates and when he speaks again his voice is grim. “The spleen, kidneys and gallbladder have all been removed from their cavities.”

Zeller’s pencil, up until that point racing furiously across the page, temporarily slows; then stops entirely.

“Good God,” repeats Jack, and Will gives an impatient toss of the head. Again with the appeals to a benevolent God; what the hell has such a thing got to do with *any* of this?

“So what do you say now Jim?” Jack adds after a pause. “Does the person responsible for this have anatomical knowledge?”

“No,” replies Price promptly. “Absolutely not. The outrages inflicted on this poor young woman are not at all consistent with skilled dissection.” He finally replaces the baize cloth, dipping his head in a respectful little nod as he does so, then begins rinsing his bloodstained hands in a bowel of water proffered by Zeller for the purpose.

“Dr Chilton says only someone with medical knowledge could have done it,” persists Jack.

“Dr Chilton is an idiot!” replies Price shrilly.

“Mr Graham is currently looking into it,” Jack adds in what’s obviously intended to be a soothing voice. “We’re seeking assorted opinions from medical consultants and will go with the consensus one.”

“Splendid,” says Price as the four of them move next door into the sluice room. “I suppose you’re aware that consensus opinion said for years that the Earth was flat?”

“Who’s Dr Chilton?” asks Will; not because he really cares, but more because the abrasiveness of the exchange is starting to grate on his increasingly frayed nerves.

“Frederick Chilton,” Jack replies. “He’s the other Divisional Surgeon.”

“Indeed he is,” interrupts Price, “in addition to which he’s also…”

“An idiot, yes – I know what your opinion is.”

“Mr Graham doesn’t, so let me elaborate it to him. Mr Graham: bear in mind at all times that the idiocy of Dr Chilton is of such profuse and prodigious proportions that it occupies its own postal address. Hansom carriages slow down in the street to ogle at the sheer spectacle of it as they drive past. On occasion it has been known to blot out the light of the sun. Small children and elderly women are at risk of perishing under the weight of it, and grown men…”

“All right Jim, that’s enough,” says Jack in an irritable voice.

“It is not. On the contrary, it is not *nearly* enough.”

“It’s really not,” adds Zeller helpfully.

“Whether or not this murderer has the professional anatomical skills of a doctor is of *vital* importance,” says Price, brandishing his pencil as if it’s a duelling sword. “In medico-legal terms…”

“I’m well aware of how important it is,” Jack replies sharply. “Which is why so much time and resources are being channelled into establishing it.”

“I’ll resume interviewing tomorrow,” says Will in a toneless, mechanical way. The others turn round to stare at him but he ignores them and heads over to the corner of the room where there’s a large Belfast sink, chipped on the corners and streaked with a grisly palette of rust, mould and dark brown speckles that can only be ancient bloodstains. On an impulse he sticks his head beneath the faucet, gasping slightly as the stingingly cold water sluices across his face and neck.

“Are you all right Mr Graham?” asks Price.

“Yes…mostly. Thank you.”

“It’s a terrible thing,” adds Jack. He ambles over and awkwardly pats Will’s shoulder. “It affects all of us.”

“Yes,” repeats Will in the same flat monotone. He knows that they probably think him overly scrupulous and sensitive, but can’t even think about how to explain the reason for his discomposure: the disparity between the impact on *them* and the impact on *him*. May as well ask a demon or spectre to describe how it feels; no normal person can know. He consoles himself that at least he didn’t vomit or pass out – both these things have happened before, and he’s never fully recovered from the self-conscious humiliation of it. His wet hair is now tangling into his eyelashes so he brushes it out the way and gives Jack a wry smile. “Honestly,” he says, “I’m fine.”

“Well…if you’re sure,” replies Jack uncertainly.

“I’m sure.”

“Of course he’s sure,” says Price in a kindly voice. “Young people are resilient. They bounce. Isn’t that right Mr Zeller? No matter how roughly one handles them they come bobbing back

for more. In fact you two ought to go for a meal together and discuss the most effective ways in which to bob."

Will smiles weakly as Price turns away to read over Zeller's notes, making a few quick, pencilled corrections before signing the bottom of the page. "There you go Mr Crawford," he says. "For your records and those of the coroner."

Jack nods his appreciation and tucks the document into his pocket. "You'll make yourself available for the inquest?" he adds.

"Of course."

"Thank you Jim."

"You're welcome. I'd hardly abandon you to the idiot mercies of Dr Chilton."

"Obliged," replies Jack with a lop-sided smile and a heavy sigh. "I suppose there's nothing more to be done here?"

"Nothing at all," says Price sadly, casting a final glance through the open door at the crumpled figure on the table. *Like an effigy,* thinks Will: a tragic representation of something pillaged, dripping and discarded that rightfully ought be living, vital and whole. From the way Zeller is loitering he suspects a pending attempt to formalize Price's suggestion of arranging a meal together – and while it's undoubtedly kindly meant, he still pretends not to notice and drifts towards the exit alone. The aversion to socialising (so automatic and ingrained) makes Will feels guilty, as well as somewhat inadequate, but it's also self-protective because right now the idea of making polite conversation while play-acting at being normal feels frankly unbearable.

In this respect the most natural thing to do would be to return home and go to bed (which course of action the others all loudly announce their attention to pursue), but Will can't face returning to his solitary room and the succession of nightmares that are inevitably lying in wait there, so instead opts to take an extended walk around the city. He pounds the dark, dusty paving stones for over an hour, hands clasped and eyes cast down like a penitent, while taking in a succession of broker's shops and greengrocer's carts, treading over the remains of crushed flowers and abandoned fruit in Covent Garden Market, and trudging past the gleaming store fronts of stationers, hat shops and haberdashers in Oxford Street that eventually give way to taverns and public houses as he moves further north towards Fitzrovia. An observer would assume he was deep in thought, although the reality is that he's trying very hard to avoid any kind of mental activity; to think about *not* thinking.

After a further 20 minutes of pacing Will decides that he's starting to grow tried, with aching limbs and heavy head to prove it, but is now faced with the inconvenient realisation that he has no clear idea of how to get home again. Although one thing he *does* recognise is the straggling vegetation of Cavendish Square: a locale that's familiar from yesterday's excursion, and which means in the past half hour he's inadvertently recreated his previous journey and Harley Street is therefore only a few minutes away. Not that he can go there of course; what would be the point? It's far too early to pay a call and his self-respect rebels at the idea of loitering outside the house on the hopeful off-chance of…what? It's not like he

and Dr Lecter are friends. Will hesitates now, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and trying to work out what exactly the appeal is. Because there undoubtedly *is* one; an invisible lure that feels as if it's drawing him towards the house (or, more specifically, its occupant) and this kind of desire to connect with someone is extremely unfamiliar to him. Briefly he considers his reluctance to spend time with Zeller; the customary avoidance of intimacy that's so familiar and ingrained it feels as much a part of him as his head or limbs. Not that Dr Lecter, being so aloof and inscrutable, appears at all the type of person who would seek intimacy himself. Will frowns, trying to make sense of it, and ultimately decides that it's most likely to be on account of feeling lonely and homesick, and the novelty of meeting someone who's so undeniably intriguing. This at, least, is something he can understand, because Hannibal Lecter is not quite like anyone he's ever met before. He's… different. An obviously well-honed sense of astuteness and intellectual enterprise, but it's more than that. He'd spent most of the meeting trying to insinuate his way inside Will's head. There had been an element of risk involved: in contrast to the safe, dull, unimaginative interactions he's accustomed to, talking with Dr Lecter had been like a living game of chess, the pieces comprised of bone and skin and breath.

Nevertheless. Slowly and deliberately Will turns the opposite way from the route to Harley Street and contemplates the most effective way of getting himself home. It won't be possible without directions, but that shouldn't be insurmountable. London's hardly some sort of sleepy suburban backwater after all, there's bound to be tradesmen awake by now setting up their shops; coal merchants, coach drivers…surely there'll be someone he can ask?

"Well look what we have here," says a sudden voice. "If it isn't that interfering foreign Bobby."

Will, being unfamiliar with the term 'Bobby,' doesn't initially connect it with himself – and is actually glancing round hopefully for the source of the voice in order to ask directions – when a heavy hand comes clamping down on his shoulder. Will immediately tenses and twists backwards, promptly coming face-to-face with a beard, a pair of heavy-lidded eyes, and a large gaping mouth with snaggly yellow teeth: none of them particularly desirable on their own, but which together coalesce into something even worse – which is none other than the angry man from Scotland Yard, still (rather unbelievably) clutching his copy of *The Tattle Crime* in a brawny hand. Oh. Oh…*fuck*.

"I *knew* it was you," the latter is now saying. He sounds triumphant. "I knew it! You walked right past my place 10 minutes ago."

"Well spotted," replies Will sarcastically before he can stop himself. The bearded man looks temporarily nonplussed at such a casual response, and Will sighs inwardly. Common sense dictates that he shouldn't be antagonising this person – and that giving his sardonic mouth free reign will ultimately achieve nothing beyond escalating things – but after the horrors of the last few hours it's literally *impossible* to muster the requisite poise or self-control to do anything else. As if to justify the feeling he begins to flick his eyes over the man's face, taking in his expression and posture, before giving a wince of distaste.

"They should have charged you at the station," Will says after a pause. "They put you down as a concerned member of the public didn't they; but you don't have any concern about these

murders at all. What *you* have is a grudge against the police, a convenient excuse to enact it, and a veneer of moral outrage to hide behind." And although he's unsettled, he's angry with it – and as the image of poor Charlotte Tate screams through his head, he can't stop himself taking a step forward and adding, low and intense: "You *disgust* me."

"Disgust you, do I?" snarls the man in return. "You stuck-up little Yankee bastard. Stupid as well, ain't ya? You're forgetting you haven't got your mates to help you out this time."

He pinions back on his heels, teeth bared in an ugly leering smile; and Will takes a few brief seconds to inventory his own reaction – a sick lunge of fear, partnered with a thrill of anticipation that's somewhat disturbing in its intensity – before doing his best to quell both and brace himself for the attack. Then he mirrors the bearded man's posture and leans back slightly himself, tucking his thumbs over his knuckles in a way that'll minimise the chance of them being broken. In this respect the latter's movements are pathetically easy to anticipate, and Will is beginning to calculate a strategy with lightning speed (*he's going to go for my face so stay close in order to block the punch; then aim for a low kick to the knee – no higher or he'll grab my leg – followed with an overhand blow to the throat…*), when from seemingly out of nowhere a familiar voice says: "Is there a problem here?"

The tone is calm, yet extremely authoritative: in fact so much so that both Will and the angry man falter and turn round, and Hannibal Lecter stares back at them in a coolly considered way that manages to be imposing and dignified, yet (Will thinks) ineffably menacing; even though it's difficult to say exactly why it's so intimidating. Why is it? Will's not sure, it just…is. There's the visual deterrent of height and musculature, of course, but it's far more than just that. Perhaps the obvious lack of fear? The imperishable self-confidence? The posture and inflection, all portending decisiveness and invulnerability? Or the very, very faint smile, suggestive of the fact that the idea of someone presuming themselves to be capable of inflicting any kind of harm is endlessly amusing. But whatever 'it' actually is has driven a stake straight through the proverbial heart of the bearded man's resolve, and he takes a step back as Hannibal takes several gliding steps forward. Will can't help thinking that there's something instinctual about the retreat, something *primal*; impossible to articulate, but simply signalling that the victim knows it's facing a threat that is too formidable to be managed successfully. He feels that if a furious, snarling dog was present it too would sense the menace in the air and grow subdued and silent – and likewise it wouldn't fully understand why.

"I know you, don't I?" says the Hannibal in the same softly ominous tone. Slowly and deliberately he reaches out a hand and cups the man's chin, turning it one way to the other. "Tell me where I know you from."

The bearded man swallows audibly and darts his tongue over his lips. "I'm the ostler at the Fitzroy Hotel. Sir."

"Oh yes, of course. It is very close by isn't it? It would appear we are virtually neighbours."

"Sir."

"That is a rather interesting coincidence."

“Yes sir.”

“*Yes sir*. So very eager to agree. I know why it is interesting to me; tell me why you find it likewise.”

“Sir?”

“Tell me why you think it is interesting.”

“I…” the bearded man opens his mouth and closes it again, gaping like a fish on a hook; and Hannibal, who has not let go of his face the entire time, finally does so with a contemptuous little flick of the hand and takes a step back. The gesture is subtle yet highly effective thinks Will enviously (and makes a mental note to practice it in the mirror later).

“Of course it could be that I am wrong,” adds Hannibal. “Perhaps it is not interesting at all. Perhaps it is nothing more than…convenient. What do you say now? Do you think I may have been mistaken?”

“No sir.”

“No? So let us consider – you think I am correct, but you do not know why?”

The bearded man falters again, and then actually has the temerity to glance at Will as if hoping he might intervene.

“I am waiting,” says Hannibal, carefully controlled and caustic.

The bearded man is beginning to look a bit desperate. “I think I should be going,” he finally says. “There’ll be guests arriving and…” Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “I really should leave. Sir.”

“I am afraid that will not be possible,” replies Hannibal smoothly, and the bearded man flinches slightly. “Not until you have apologised for your very regrettable rudeness.”

“I’m sorry,” comes the hurried reply. “I apologise. Sir.”

“No, no – not to me. To Inspector Graham.”

The bearded man turns round and earnestly repeats the sentiment to Will, who folds his arms and fights the urge to tell him to fuck off.

“Very good,” says Hannibal briskly. “Now, off you go – all the way to the Fitzroy Hotel, quick as you can. Aren’t there guests waiting?”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes, indeed. What a shame on their account – it seems that our acquaintance is destined to come to a premature close. But who knows, perhaps our paths may cross again before too long?”

The bearded man's face contorts into what's clearly intended as a polite smile (but comes out more like a tortured grimace), although wisely opts to neither confirm or deny this in order to avoid further interrogation about whether he *really* agrees with it or not. Then he removes his cap and politely doffs it. Then he glances nervously at Hannibal. And then he leaves. There's a brief silence and Will lets out a breath that he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

"Another fortunate coincidence," Hannibal says leisurely. "I have been up for most of the night with a patient – a rather critical case. At the time I was not overly delighted to be called out so late, but it would appear to have ultimately worked out well."

"You're rather terrifying," says Will. It comes out as more admiring than he intended it to. Nevertheless, he's belatedly aware that his initial, unconscious instinct once Hannibal appeared was to was to look to him for protection – and the knowledge is uncomfortable and irritating, if for no other reason than Will takes great pride his independence and capacity to take care of himself, and is highly reluctant to so readily devolve it to someone else.

Hannibal smiles slightly. His face, illuminated in the gaslight, looks somewhat unworldly: all planes and sharp angles. "And are you terrified?"

"No."

"Good. I would not have you so."

"Would you not?" asks Will with a smile of his own.

"No, indeed; terrified people are invariably dull and uninspired. Spirit and imagination are far more becoming and you appear to be in ample possession of both." Will raises his eyebrows questioningly. "I observed your earlier exchange," Hannibal clarifies. "Really, it was hardly necessary for me to intervene at all. In fact perhaps I was premature in wishing to preserve you; perhaps I should have remained as a spectator? Perhaps I should have allowed – how shall we put it? *Nature to take its course*?" He runs his eyes over Will thoughtfully before adding, in a more casual tone: "You are a courageous boy aren't you?"

Will knits his eyebrows and thrusts his hands into his pockets in an unconsciously defiant way. "Please don't call me a boy."

"Why?" says Hannibal.

"Seriously? You know, most people would now be apologising for calling me something I object to and you just want to hear why I object to it."

"I do. But I am not like most people. Besides, you are starting to smile; you are not genuinely offended. And why should you be? There is nothing inherently depreciating about the word itself."

"N-o-o-o," says Will cautiously. "I suppose not."

"If you don't mind my asking, how old *are* you?"

"Twenty-four."

“Oh, well then; ‘boy’ is not so very inappropriate from my point of view. No…it is the judgment that is presumed to lie behind the word to which you object. Isn’t it Inspector Graham? The notion that you are considered young and therefore incapable and inexperienced. Your talents have fated you into a position which is far more elevated than customary for someone of your age; yet while you inhabit it from merit, you are still condemned to a constant need to prove yourself to those more advanced in years yet less endowed with ability. You have a horror of not being taken seriously.” Hannibal pauses and then smiles again. “Rest assured that I take you *extremely* seriously.”

“You don’t know me,” says Will, somewhat sullen because he suspects he is only being placated.

“I have spoken to you for over an hour; it is more than sufficient. Less than half the time would have been enough.” Or even no time at all, considering the most salient personality and biographical points were derived from a photograph – although of course Hannibal does not choose to divulge this. Instead he simply adds: “I believe I am beginning to get the measure of you.”

“I believe you genuinely *think* you are,” says Will, who’s starting to smile.

“Oh? You disagree? Yes, of course you do; we all cherish the notion of our own unfathomable, fascinating complexity – and how insipid and transparent everyone else is in comparison. But perhaps you are right; even as I am. As it happens, ‘hidden depths’ formed a part of my conclusions.”

This makes Will laugh in spite of himself. “So your version of having the measure of me is that you currently *don’t* have the measure.”

“Correct.”

Will smiles again, biting his lip and looking at the floor before glancing up at Hannibal from underneath his eyelashes. He’s obviously completely unaware of how appealing the gesture makes him look, and Hannibal’s own smile grows slightly broader.

“You’re rather fond of having the last word, aren’t you?” says Will.

“I am.”

“And won’t readily concede it. I suppose it’s not very easy to try and outwit you?”

“It is not; although you might find it rather diverting to try. Who knows, perhaps you might even be successful?”

“Now you’re humouring me. I don’t think you believe that for a moment.”

Hannibal merely takes a few seconds to stroke his eyes over Will’s face, without conceding whether he does or he doesn’t, and then takes a few leisurely paces forwards; at which point Will clears his throat awkwardly and replaces his hands in his pockets. “Nevertheless, Inspector Graham, forgive me for saying so but you appear somewhat unsettled. And I don’t

suppose you wander around the streets at this hour for your own amusement." He pauses briefly, allowing the insinuation to hang forlornly in the air. "There has been another murder, hasn't there?"

"Yes," replies Will, inadvertently allowing a hint of wretchedness to leak into his voice.

Hannibal gives him a thoughtful look. "Perhaps you wish to discuss your thoughts regarding it? It is rather early for breakfast but I am sure something less formal would suffice."

"I don't want to inconvenience you," says Will automatically.

"As regards that, recall what I told you before about not allowing you to do such a thing."

"Well…" Will instinctively hesitates, beginning the usual mental weighing-up of the benefits and disadvantages of any kind of social interaction, before remembering that he doesn't know how to get home even if he wanted to; at least this way he might be able to finally get some directions. Although in that case why not simply acquire them right here? Will hesitates again. Oh fuck it, it's not like there's any harm in it; either in being invited or wanting to accept. Is there? "In that case, yes," he says and his voice, in his own ears, sounds unexpectedly animated. "Thank you. That's very kind."

"You are quite welcome." Hannibal lightly places his palm on Will's shoulder to steer him in the right direction for the house; and while he removes it almost immediately Will still finds himself in a truly disorientating state of resenting the unsolicited contact whilst simultaneously wishing the hand had lingered for a little longer. He's not used to feeling like this (has *never* really felt like this) and it makes him uncomfortable. He frowns to himself, before suddenly becoming aware that Hannibal is giving him a long sideways glance.

"You know," adds Hannibal smoothly, as if interpreting the source of Will's discomposure, "I suspect that many people would consider it inauspicious to become acquainted under such grisly circumstances. But who knows whether or not the ill omen may yet become a favourable one."

"Oh yes?" says Will vaguely.

"Indeed yes. After all, they do say that the firmest friendships are often forged in the greatest adversity."

"You think we're destined to become friends?" replies Will, making a feint at indifference as a final, desperate attempt to conceal how heady and overwhelmed Hannibal makes him feel. "*Firm* friends? That seems rather ambitious. What if I don't find you that interesting?"

There's no immediate response to this, and Will has a sudden sinking feeling that – as usual – he's gone too far in the service of protecting himself and has caused genuine offence. He turns his head to look at Hannibal; and is deeply disconcerted to realise that rather than displaying the expected resentment or indignation, the latter is merely gazing straight at him with the familiar Sphinx-like smile. Hannibal meets his eye and the smile, once again, grows fractionally wider.

"You will," is all he says.

Chapter End Notes

I gather that forensic medical examination in the 1880s was more sophisticated than is generally acknowledged – and because the police knew they were dealing with a serial killer there was a protocol in place for autopsies linked to the Whitechapel murders – so to my (admittedly limited) knowledge the descriptions/dialogue here are consistent with what would have been known at the time. In this respect the references to facial bruising and throat wounds are historically accurate; however, for the reasons outlined in Chapter 1, the post-mortem injuries are fictitious and don't represent a real-life victim.

On a trivial note: I dunno how old Will is supposed to be in S1 (or for that matter how old HD was when then filmed it) although I'm guessing it's a LOT more than 24. However I pitched him as younger in this, partly for story purposes but also to reflect the fact that people generally did things at an earlier age back in the day.

That is all. See you next week :-)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Early update this week on the grounds I'll be spending all of Saturday getting spectacularly drunk and dancing like an idiot (and then all of Sunday un-tagging the photos on Facebook).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey to Harley Street is made without further conversation, and the completeness of the silence is striking to Will – not only that they're making no noise themselves, but that the city itself has such an unearthly quietness about it. It's as if the whole of London is sedated and the two of them the only living inhabitants: pacing through still, soundless streets in the moonlight and fog while everyone else lies dull and insensate behind closed doors. With a different companion such a thing might feel desolate – maybe even unnerving – but in this respect what's equally striking is that compared to Will's recent succession of silent promenades this one feels calm and comfortable rather than strained. Hannibal walks – or, more appropriately, *strides* – in a quick decisive manner, very similar to how he does so much else (head up, shoulders back); and Will unconsciously finds himself mirroring the posture as a substitution for his more usual anxious hunch (eyes fixed on the pavements, shoulders clenched) before deciding that he definitely prefers the former. Admittedly there's still quite a stretch between walking (striding) confidently and being able to terrify big, bearded bastard assailants with a single flick of the wrist, but it's as good a place to start as any; and no doubt larger oak trees have grown out of smaller acorns. Not that that's the most promising choice of metaphor…In fact, when all's said and done, it's not that promising at all. *Oh God*, thinks Will gloomily, *I've just characterised myself as an acorn. A fucking acorn. WHY?*...and then they've arrived at the right house and Hannibal is unlocking the door and politely standing aside to allow Will to go through first. The hallway seems even more narrow and oppressive than it did previously, although at least there's no sign of Mary – or any other servants for that matter.

"Come through to the kitchen," says Hannibal, which rather surprises Will because it's the one room in the house with which he assumed men in England have little to do. Impossible, for example, to imagine Jack Crawford bounding around in a kitchen. Jack Crawford probably doesn't even know where his kitchen is…probably isn't even aware he possesses one. Aren't kitchens supposed to be the concern of servants? As opposed to the 'gentleman of the house' (Will's mouth gives an involuntary twitch of derision at this ridiculous expression), who are surely supposed to entertain visitors in large, pompous rooms with beakers of brandy and smoking jackets and portraits of equally large and pompous ancestors observing disapprovingly from the walls. Not that he's complaining; he'd infinitely prefer the comforting informality of a kitchen table to running the gauntlet of smoking jackets and pompous ancestors. For want of anything better to say, he puts an extremely attenuated

version of this observation to Hannibal, who merely smiles thinly and says: “Yes, but I am not English.”

Will wants to ask him where he *is* from, but is concerned it might look prying or invasive to demand this type of information before it’s freely offered (and, if he’s totally honest with himself, he doesn’t want to admit how interested he is in such scraps of personal detail) so ultimately says nothing and follows Hannibal in silence down several flights of stone-flagged stairs. Hardly anyone in America would have their kitchen at basement level, but from what he’s seen so far the opposite is true in England – at least for the wealthy and well-to-do. As it is the kitchen, whilst subterranean, is extremely spacious: obviously the result of two smaller rooms whose adjoining wall was demolished to conjoin them into a larger one. It’s dominated by a cast iron cooking range that’s slumbering in the corner like a large black dog and Will automatically gravitates towards it, still shivering slightly in his thin overcoat.

Hannibal turns round and raises an eyebrow. “You are cold?”

“A little,” admits Will, who’s now practically hugging the range. “It’s my own fault, I stayed outdoors too long.”

“It is less the duration of exposure than inadequate defence from it,” replies Hannibal (with, Will thinks, completely unnecessary severity) as he gestures towards Will’s coat. “I am not sure what your native climate is like, but you are going to require something far more substantial to see you through a winter in London.”

“I’ll look into it,” replies Will, somewhat half-heartedly considering the cost it’s going to entail.

Hannibal gives him a quick glance. “I have one which you are quite welcome to borrow, although admittedly it may be a little large for you. It is only a *loan*,” he adds when Will opens his mouth to protest. “You can return it to me when you have acquired one of your own.”

“I really can’t accept it.”

“Why can’t you?” asks Hannibal patiently.

Will falters. Come to think of it, *why* can’t he?

“Quite,” adds Hannibal. “No reason at all. Now, would you care for something to eat?”

“Are you planning on getting something for yourself?”

“Yes, although the offer would have stood regardless. While I appreciate your good manners, I really must insist we proceed with all future exchanges on the understanding that I shall not allow you to inconvenience me – and that in any proposals I might make to you, you should first consult your own wishes in the matter rather than mine.”

Will makes a truly heroic effort not to roll his eyes in response to this speech and Hannibal, as if sensing the resentment, gives him a little conspiratorial smile. “You are a singular

combination of attributes aren't you Inspector Graham?" he says. "A genuine desire to please yet still bristling under the weight of social expectations – rebelling at conformity whilst simultaneously wishing to conform."

Oh for God's sake, thinks Will: all this over a fucking second hand coat and a plate of leftovers. Anyway, he's pretty certain that Dr Lecter (Hannibal) would hardly have been overwhelmed with joy if Will had called his bluff and highhandedly insisted on being fed and clothed in a suitably majestic style. He briefly amuses himself in imagining it: *Why yes, you fool, you're goddamned right I want something to eat. Now kindly get to it while I sit here on my ass and watch you labouring away on my behalf. And buy me a brand new overcoat while you're at it*.

But all he says is: "You can call me Will…If you like." He hopes he sounds casual – suitably mature and worldly – like he doesn't really care either way. The reality is that he's still young and socially inexperienced enough to find something sincere and ardent in the exchange of Christian names, as if it confers some sort of special understanding; although there's also the fact 'Inspector Graham' always sounds like it's referring to someone else. In that respect Inspector Graham is rather like a flaunting, grandiose elder brother who is impossible to live up to, and who you have to ostensibly pretend to admire whilst secretly hating him behind his back and longing for the day when he gets exposed as the magnificently fraudulent bastard he actually is. So in conclusion – fuck Inspector Graham, that smug, insufferable shit (along with the beard. And the hat).

"Thank you," is all Hannibal replies, without indicating whether or not he intends to. He gives Will another thoughtful look (which Will nearly grimaces under the force of) before quickly and efficiently beginning to assemble components for a meal. Will watches him, rather fascinated; he doesn't think he's ever actually seen a man cook before. His father, of course, was not above buttering bread, or boiling potatoes, or even flinging a steak in a skillet as the occasion demanded; but this is actually *cooking.* It's *culinary.* Will realises he's thinking of these terms in an exclamatory, italicised way, but it's hard not to emphasise the gastronomic elements whilst observing the way that Dr Lecter (can he ever *really* call him Hannibal?) chops parsley, slices hard-boiled eggs, boils rice, and blends butter into a frothy little concoction which is mixed with sultanas and a mysterious, fragrant-smelling powder from a smoked glass jar before being poured over what looks like flaked fish.

"Kedgeree," explains Hannibal, providing Will with what is clearly the larger portion. "You will no doubt encounter it again before too long, as well as assorted compatriots such as chutney and curries and the like. There is a perfect mania in London for so-called Anglo-Indian cuisine."

"Oh yes, of course," replies Will, irritated with himself for not working it out before having to be told. "The *colonial* influence." He's actually sick to death of being told about the British Empire (worst of all is when it's described as 'She,' as if it's some kind of sentient being). People refer to it constantly in tones of devoted reverence; even someone like Jack doesn't appear completely immune. As an American, needless to say, it's particularly aggravating. He adds it to the growing mental inventory of irritants, despite the fact it's rather out of place on the list (Things In Life That Can Fuck Off: title, hat, beard…British Empire). Then he

glances up and catches a sardonic smile from Hannibal, and feels an immediate sense of solidarity in that they are both clearly thinking the same thing.

“Indeed, the colonial influence,” says Hannibal, as if in confirmation. “An archaic concept, and undoubtedly fated for decline and dismemberment before the century is out. In the meantime, however, we must take our consolation where we can.” He smiles very faintly at the sight of Will, who is currently devouring the aforesaid consolation as if he’s half-starved. “And of course you represent the loss of its most populous possession.”

“And God forbid anyone ever forgets it,” replies Will with his mouth full. “I’ve been called an ‘ex-colonial’ four times since I arrived.”

“Have you really?” muses Hannibal. “How terribly rude.”

“I don’t mind,” answers Will, still forking up kedgeree. “I’ve been called a lot worse.”

“*Have* you?” says Hannibal again; and if Will were paying closer attention he would immediately detect the clear current of interest imbued in the tone of this statement. But he’s not paying close attention, on the grounds of being too preoccupied with wishing he’d never said it in the first place.

“Yes, I…” Will falters, and then puts his fork down and frowns, tying to contrive a way of getting out of the current conversational hole without conceding that the ‘much worse’ relates to the work he does and – more to the point – the way in which he does it. In turn, he knows that his reluctance to confide this is because while he’s accepted that Hannibal will inevitably catch on to the wary mistrust that everyone else seems to feel and not want anything more to do with him, it’s also coupled with a pathetically hopeful optimism that maybe – just maybe, just this once – it might not happen. Or, at the very least, that it might be possible to delay it.

Hannibal watches him for a few more seconds, cataloguing each subtle degree and distinction of unhappiness that’s flickering over Will’s face (meticulously and devotedly adding each one to his growing internal dossier) before abruptly and deliberately changing the subject in the most disarming way possible by announcing: “I see you are in the habit of tucking your pen behind your ear.”

“My…what?”

Hannibal gestures at his own face. His cheekbones are so high, thinks Will randomly: they jut out like balconies. “You have ink just here,” Hannibal adds. “If you will permit me?” Without waiting for an answer he whips a thick cotton handkerchief from his jacket pocket, dips it in the water jug, then stretches out a long arm and neatly wipes at the offending ink stain, his thumb brushing very lightly over Will’s own cheekbone as he does so. Will, who’s too surprised (and relieved by the change of subject) to properly object, has a horrible feeling that he’s blushing. In fact he’s certainly, almost definitely blushing. Oh God. Then he tries to convince himself it’s from the indignity of having his face swabbed in the manner of a grubby five year old, as opposed to the more troubling realisation that the casual intimacy of the gesture has unsettled him.

“It is in your hair as well,” says Hannibal calmly (who, Will thinks enviously, is not *remotely* unsettled: no doubt if Jack Crawford were here then his face would likewise be at the handkerchief’s mercy; and no doubt he’d suffer it in silence too. No doubt the *British Empire* would submit to have its face dabbed at, were such a thing possible). Hannibal smiles benignly before adding: “Although I am afraid that is going to be beyond my power to remove.”

“Thank you,” says Will, a bit grudgingly.

“You are welcome.”

“For the food also. It was wonderful.”

“Likewise; it is my pleasure.”

“I’ve hardly ever had food like this. It’s impressive.” He has a vague recollection of the mention of dinner parties at the previous interview – it’s almost impossible to imagine what such formal gatherings would be like if this is the kind of calibre that can be prepared in the middle of the night at a moment’s notice.

Hannibal shrugs modestly: an elegant curl of the right shoulder.

“Most people I know consider cooking just as a means to an end,” persists Will, determined to show proper appreciation. Although even as he’s speaking, he’s guiltily aware that he’s undoubtedly one of those people himself (and in fact would lead the vanguard of individuals who couldn’t give a shit about cooking), yet is phrasing the statement to imply a more cultured sensibility that can loftily take pity on all the filthy Godless peasants who are unable to appreciate the importance of fine dining.

“Well, in that they are mistaken,” Hannibal replies briskly. “To cook well is to make an art out of a necessity. It requires creativity, imagination, dedication and passion. A true chef is an innovator – an artist who works with food as a painter works his with oils and palette. I see you are looking sceptical but I am perfectly serious. What is an artist, as Mr Oscar Wilde says, if not a creator of beautiful things? And what could be more conducive to the service of beauty than taking what is deplorably dull and stolid – ‘our daily bread,’ as the vernacular has it – and transforming it into something that entices the senses; that can innovate, or even provocate, but ultimately all act to the purpose of rendering something exquisite from the banal and mundane?”

Will’s eyes, which have been getting wider and wider during this speech, obediently now descend onto his plate as if in respectful contemplation of artistry (while secretly fighting the urge to laugh). Nevertheless, and despite the levity, he can’t shake the increasing sense – sowed during the very first meeting and growing all the time – that much of what Hannibal says to him is running on two separate levels simultaneously. It’s actually rather fascinating, like a three-dimensional puzzle box: the obvious surface interpretation which anyone might intuit, but so often the tantalizing hint of something deeper lurking below the surface; reserved only for those enlightened few who can guess the meaning. Not, admittedly, that he has any clear idea of what the meaning could be...although it would be quite compelling to try and find out.

“Even the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci include various reflections on food,” adds Hannibal, eyes still fixed on Will. “He was a vegetarian, you understand, and considered that imaginative preparation could be employed to supplant the taste of meat. An inventive concept…wouldn’t you agree? And a fine example of artistry and ingenuity applied to a rather prosaic problem.”

Will glances down again at the remains of the fish they just ate. “You’re not a vegetarian are you?”

Hannibal smiles thinly. “I am not.”

“Oh,” replies Will. And then: “Neither am I.” He hesitates again, wondering if he dares articulate what he’s been thinking. He catches Hannibal’s eye and can’t help feeling like the latter is almost daring him to…Possibly. Is he? *Hell yes – I dare*. “You refer a lot to artistry,” Will finally says, carefully choosing each word. “So what about artful*ness*?” Emboldened by Hannibal’s interested expression he adds: “Contrivance. Circumspection. I often get the impression that you don’t always say what you really mean.”

“Machiavellian,” says Hannibal, extravagantly rolling the ‘l’ sound, which in his smoky accent sounds particularly striking.

Will shifts awkwardly in his chair. “No, I didn’t…I’m sorry, I didn’t intend to imply…”

“Do not trouble yourself, I am not offended. Although I am afraid you are giving me more credit for skills in machination and deception than I am entitled to.” The enigmatic smile briefly reappears. “Nevertheless I am certainly intrigued by your analysis; you appear to be someone who is unusually imaginative. Indeed, I suspect that may be something we have in common – the power of our imaginations.”

“Perhaps,” replies Will cautiously. He realises that, once again, he’s beginning to regret saying anything. Hannibal is now regarding him thoughtfully, and it’s an increasing effort not to writhe under the penetrating force of the stare.

“Yet there is also something else with you,” Hannibal eventually adds. “You are…*perceptive*. Aren’t you Inspector Graham?”

This whole conversation is now undoubtedly straying back onto hazardous ground, so Will just shrugs (it’s not as elegant as Hannibal’s version, although Will still decides to give himself full marks for effort) and pushes back his plate before he can inadvertently say anything else to make it worse.

“I should be going,” he mutters, “I’ve…”

“What?” says Hannibal.

Will’s mind immediately goes blank (the bastard thing). It’s a fair question and for that matter – what? It’s too early to pretend he needs to meet with anyone, but likewise ‘I’ve got to go home and go to bed,’ while plausible, still feels like the kind of thing a child would say (as

opposed to a mature man of the world with a beard). He finally settles on: “I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“Please remember what I said about inconveniencing me. Besides, I understood you wished to discuss tonight’s events and yet we have not mentioned them at all.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately, obviously wrestling with some internal conflict that’s pulling him in contrary directions; and Hannibal waits patiently – boxing clever and biding his time – because there’s so much to savour in witnessing this kind of enigmatic melancholy. The silence begins to stretch out, broken only by the anxious, absent-minded rhythm that Will is tapping onto the table top with his fingers and Hannibal tracks his gaze to where the sound is coming from – at which point Will frowns self-consciously and goes still before locking his fingers together. Hannibal continues to look, privately deciding that there’s actually something rather touching about Will’s hands: how young and delicate-looking they are, the grazes (still not quite healed) on the right thumb, the ink stains on his index finger and the way the nails have been bitten down to the quick. The slenderness and length of bone makes them look willowy, yet nevertheless there’s undoubtedly a certain potency in them too. Fragile yet ferocious. Another silence: the hands are now engaged in propping up Will’s head, as if there’s too much brimming inside for his slim neck to sustain the weight of it, and Hannibal leans forward across the table.

“It clearly had a grave impact on you,” he says.

“Yes. It was…terrible.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes very slightly. “I suppose the others were affected the same way?”

“Yes. Yes, they *were*, but for me…it’s…it’s that I have to imagine…” Will abruptly stops, as if a switch has been flicked, and Hannibal’s eyes narrow even further. “It’s…difficult,” he finally adds, a bit aimlessly.

“Indeed it is Inspector Graham.”

“Please, call me…”

“Will – yes, you have already said. All in good time. So did this latest event yield any further information?”

“No, not substantially. Everyone is still very preoccupied with whether or not he’s a doctor, but the opinion of the *actual* doctors is that it’s inconclusive.”

“He is not a doctor,” says Hannibal.

Will’s head jerks up sharply at this, and when he speaks it sounds as if he’s struggling to keep the impatience out of his voice. “How can you possibly be so sure? You haven’t attended the autopsy, you haven’t read the pathologist’s report; you didn’t even see photographs of the wounds. You barely looked at the pictures I gave you – the only ones you saw were of their faces.”

“And they told me all I needed to know,” replies Hannibal in the same calm tone. “Those, and the details of the murder scenes, were more than sufficient to indicate that this individual is not a doctor.”

Will can suddenly feel his tiredness melting away. There’s a beat of silence as he fixes his eyes on Hannibal before he leans forward across the table. “*How could you tell?”* he asks, low and intense. And then when Hannibal doesn’t immediately respond: “Please. Explain it to me.”

Hannibal leans further forward too so they’re both staring at each other. “Those photographs you showed me: you observed the bruising around the face and neck?”

“Of course.”

“Some lividity; also signs of inflammation.”

“Yes.”

“Which tells us…?”

“They were inflicted antemortem.”

“Precisely – immediately prior to death. So why would he do this? What is his design?”

Will frowns again. “Usually the face would be targeted to either hinder identification or from personal animosity towards the victim…but clearly neither of those factors apply here.”

“No, indeed they do not. The damage is not severe enough to answer either purpose; he does as much as he needs to and no more.”

Will opens his mouth and then falters, suddenly confused. This type of dynamic with a senior, mentor-type figure (because surely that’s what Hannibal is?) is completely unfamiliar to him; not least because of the unsettling sensation that Hannibal is entirely aware of what the answer is, but is less concerned with a solution being broached than he is with Will being able to work it out for himself. He glances at Hannibal from over the top of his glasses and the latter stares back, serene and inscrutable, as if daring Will to voice the suspicion. It’s like a game: Bishop takes Knight, Rook to King’s Rook: *check*.

“He wants to incapacitate them,” Will finally replies. “The initial onslaught to the head and face is to subdue the victim as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, very good. And yet here the crime scene evidence comes into play, because we see that he does it virtually in the middle of the street. It is extraordinarily high risk. Why?”

“He’s reckless. Chaotic.”

“What *else*, Will?”

Will closes his eyes and frowns. *I’ve been searching for hours to find someone in a quiet street – it’s not ideal but it’s the best I can do because I can’t get her to follow me into an*

alley. *But this is risky, and I don't want to get caught, so I have to ensure she won't make any noise...* Oh God, *of course*. It's obvious – how could he not have seen it before? He abruptly opens his eyes again. "It's because *he can't get them to accompany him somewhere more secluded*. He has no confidence in his ability to persuade them verbally, so he has to overpower them as hastily as possible before they can defend themselves."

Hannibal smiles and leans back again in his chair. "Exactly; very good indeed. You see why I am so opposed to him being a doctor? Whilst our medical men are not inevitably the most socially gracious of all professions, one does not attain that level of education and status whilst having a personality so inadequate that he cannot even convince a desperate, destitute street woman – who, let us acknowledge, cannot afford the luxury of being overly particular in their choice of customer – to accompany him into an alleyway. Yet that is precisely what is happening here. Murdering these women virtually in plain sight carries an extreme level of risk, yet he feels he has no other choice because he is incapable – or at the very least, *believes* that he is incapable – of luring them somewhere more private. Hence he subdues them into unconsciousness with the blows to the head, kills them by cutting their throats, and then once they are dead…"

"…Mutilates the bodies. Which is his primary motivation."

"Exactly. The need to inflict the mutilations is the *reason* he commits the crimes; the injuries to the head and neck are simply the means for making the first thing possible."

"We got it wrong," says Will, half to himself. "Jack Crawford thought the Ripper left the bodies in the street to taunt the police. I thought it was him being disordered and frenzied…"

"It is, partly. Certainly it is closer to the truth than Mr Crawford's surmise."

"But it's not just that is it? It's because he has no other choice." Will now leans back in his own chair, tapping his fingers against the table top again and suddenly reenergized. He intrinsically feels that this conjecture is correct, and that in turn it can invigorate the investigation by narrowing the field for the type of assailant they're looking for. He glances up at Hannibal with newfound respect. "Thank you," he says. "It's actually rather extraordinary that you could intuit so much from so little."

Hannibal repeats the previous elegant shrug. "Yes, I dare say; but haven't you just done the exact same thing yourself?" He notes that Will ducks his head at this and blushes slightly. Modest, then, yet still receptive to praise; a rather unusual and appealing combination.

"Could I speak with you again?" Will is now asking, in a voice that's rather touching in its earnestness. "It would be extremely helpful. If you had the time…" Hannibal doesn't respond. "I mean, if it wasn't any trouble…" Still no answer. Will can feel himself getting irritated, yet also anxious, and he shoots Hannibal a rather defiant stare (which needless to say bounces off with no discernible effect). "Dr Lecter?"

As abruptly as he closed down Hannibal promptly comes back to life again and shifts in his chair, straightening his spine so his back lengthens and he appears to be looking down on Will. His greater height gives him an advantage but Will automatically straightens up as well, refusing to concede any kind of weakness.

“To do so would place me in the position of police consultancy,” says Hannibal after a further pause. “And I believe it is customary to compensate consultants for their time. I would also require compensation; however, I do not want money.”

“No? So what do you want?”

There’s another pause and then Hannibal smiles (the faintest flicker around the mouth) as he slowly runs his eyes over this almost *exquisitely* intriguing anthology of consequence and principles. This uniquely peerless specimen; this rare plant. A volatile, questing, wide-eyed and pale-skinned collection of foibles and uncertainties with its exuberantly young hands and fine delicate bones, its boldness tempered by timidity and its recklessness by caution; its hint of luminous lethal beauty with a slim, dark soul…and which taken together is almost perfect in its extreme imperfection. Something wild and wary and precious and audacious, and seemingly designed purely for its breathless capacity to fascinate and inspire. In a city (a country; a *world*) teeming with dull, blind, mechanical people here is one imbued with a sublime kind of energy, sense and unconscious sensuality: a voltage that thrums and pulses, and which deserves (demands) to be wrestled and deconstructed before breathed in and savoured. Furthermore, there’s no denying that the fervent desire to discover another human being in this way – from a spirit of pleasure and appreciation rather than raw desecration or destruction – is deeply unfamiliar; and this in and of itself is…interesting. What’s even more interesting is that while Will has unknowingly subverted Hannibal’s expectations about himself, he finds that he can’t quite bring himself to resent Will for it; or even begrudge him the success. This should be concerning. It *is* concerning. In fact it’s the type of speculation that he would normally avoid on the grounds that such entanglements are a hazardous waste of time; and squandering time is something to which Hannibal, on principle, is usually strongly opposed. Yet the situation exists as it is. It is irrefutable; elemental, even – to claim anything else would likewise be a waste of time. And so even though he’s acutely aware that what he’s about to propose could have a whole *range* of unanticipated outcomes, his deliberations still conclude with an ardent wish to pursue it; not least because – in the simplest possible terms – it no longer seems feasible to relinquish Will and allow him to walk away. *The game*, thinks Hannibal, with a thrill of anticipation, *is afoot*.

“Quid pro quo, Will Graham,” he finally says; at which Will looks confused and Hannibal smiles again. “I desire the principle of reciprocity. Granting one thing in exchange for something else. I provide you with information, you provide me with information in return.”

“About what? The investigation?”

“No, not the investigation.”

“About what then?”

There’s a pause and then Hannibal leans forward, eyes fixed on Will’s face. “About – yourself.”

In the resulting silence Will blinks a few times and then awkwardly clears his throat, unable to tell whether this extraordinary offer is serious or if it’s some kind of elaborate joke that (as usual) everyone except him is able to understand. “Why on earth would you want to know about me?” he finally manages to say.

“Because I find you extremely interesting.”

Will shoulders arrange themselves into a defiant little tilt; sceptical yet cautious.

“Is that not reason enough; what better motivation could there be? Besides, is it not a *very* small thing compared to what is being offered in return?” The candles are burning down now and Hannibal’s eyes almost seem to be gleaming in the half-light. “I’ll help you catch him Will.”

“And if I say no?” He doesn’t really think he’s going to, but habit compels him not to forfeit a point too easily.

Hannibal waves his hand, suddenly casual once more. “If you say no then the matter ends here and we do not proceed any further. Instead I shall visit Superintendent Crawford and confide my insights to him in a nice, dull, formal way and receive my banker’s note in return.” Of course he has no intention of doing anything of the kind – but Will doesn’t know that.

There’s a further silence as Will shifts uneasily in his chair, staring back at this rather extraordinary individual who’s as ardent as a Baptist, as chiselled as a statuette…and as mad as the proverbial hatter. Except that’s not right, amends Will, because he’s clearly *not* mad; not anywhere close. But this thought in turn promptly triggers another one, because hasn’t Hannibal already expressed an intense interest in those who might be considered psychologically vulnerable? At which point Will gives a small, unhappy sigh as he remembers their conversation from the other day and miserably deduces that – of course – Hannibal must want to use him as a case study. *Oh God*: no doubt if he agrees to this then the results of their discussions are destined to appear in some august medical journal (identifying details discreetly altered, but Will himself still clearly recognisable to those in the know as the freak who can think like a killer). There’d be an awful permanence in it: immortalized on paper and passed from one so-called expert to another; small, sickly eyes squinting at him through monocles and rambling on with barely-concealed glee about how pathological he is. It’s one thing for colleagues like Jack to see it in the moment, but moments are just that – seconds and minutes of time that ultimately come to an end. This would be eternal shame and endless exposure. But as painful as it is, he still forces himself to dismiss the reservation as soon as it occurs; because there’s no doubt that such humiliation would be an extremely small price to pay if it could mean unmasking and apprehending this unknown predator. Or even – and here his heart gives a further hopeful leap – provide the opportunity to go back home with his reputation restored. It could be a fresh start of sorts. Will’s mind briefly mists over at the image: his father kindly and approving for once; colleagues less wary and mistrustful with the usual frowns and disdain replaced by warm claps on the back and respectful handshakes; and then maybe, a little further down the line, the ultimate reward – an opportunity to escape it all and move somewhere secluded where he won’t be hounded all the time. A converted farmhouse perhaps, or something similar…he could achieve his ambition of owning a dog. Surely it’s not all that much to ask?

“All right,” he says slowly. “Yes. Fine.” And then, far more for his benefit than Hannibal’s: “I suppose there’s no harm in it.”

“Certainly there is none.” If Hannibal’s feeling triumphant he has too much self-restraint to show it. “I am not going to force your confidence; I cannot compel you to answer any questions you do not wish to. However I do have one condition.”

Will frowns, resenting the abrupt introduction of a sub-clause. “What?” he says, somewhat sulkily.

“Complete honesty. I shall not tolerate obfuscation; if you do not wish to answer then say so – although I shall expect you to explain why – but if you *lie* to me then the arrangement ceases. And be assured that I shall be able to tell if you are lying.”

“Fine,” says Will again, whilst secretly thinking ‘*we’ll see about that*.’ His talents for dissembling are legendary; really, the one benefit of being so uncomfortable with your sense of self is the way it expedites slipping into a different one – and when the situation demands it, Will can deceive so fluently that he sometimes finds it vaguely troubling. Not that Hannibal is of the same low calibre as his usual opponents; but even so, it might be quite interesting to try.

“Then we have an arrangement,” replies Hannibal, privately smiling to himself as he notes the defiant little frown line between Will’s eyebrows and correctly intuiting what it represents. Idly, he imagines reaching across the table and using his thumb to smooth the line away; the way it would feel – the soft warmth and sensation of it – and how Will would once again quiver then go rigid beneath his hand. But all he says is: “I imagine that you are now on the verge of insisting that you ‘really must be going’, so I shall not detain you any further. Although you are very welcome to remain here if you need some rest before the journey. I have a spare bedroom; in fact I have several.”

The idea of sleep is extremely appealing, and Will briefly considers accepting the offer before deciding that he can’t bear to risk the humiliation of rousing the whole house with his screaming nightmares. “Thank you,” he says, “but I…” He’s about to say ‘*I really must be going’* and stops himself just in time. “I should get back. My landlady might be alarmed if she notices I didn’t come home.” Not that this is particularly likely…although it’s nice to fantasize that it could be the case.

“Then let me fetch the coat before you leave,” says Hannibal, and Will repeats the sequence of appreciative nods and smiles all over again (internally cringing as he does so at how witless he suspects it makes him look). As predicted it’s a little too large, being intended for someone taller and broader in the shoulders, although beyond rolling up the cuffs there isn’t much he can do about either of these things. At least it’s warm, and the material feels soft and luxurious with a pleasant aroma of sandalwood about it. “Thank you,” he says sincerely, “I’ll return it as soon as I can get my own.”

“You really are very welcome to keep it,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely way. “I am unlikely to wear it again myself so its absence is no particular deprivation. Besides, coats are expensive; in London *everything* is expensive. I can’t imagine Jack Crawford is overly generous with your salary and you would do better to spend it on other things.”

Like laudanum, thinks Will gloomily. *And alcohol*. *And a ticket on the first boat home*. But all he says is “Thank you, that’s very kind,” without actually indicating whether he intends to

keep the coat or not.

Hannibal nods in agreement and then looms over Will in order to adjust the lapels and brush some lint from the collar (which makes Will writhe with awkwardness all over again) before asking: “Do you know how to find your way from here?”

Will admits that he doesn’t, but after a brief hesitation opts to request directions for the general district rather than the exact street; because if Hannibal doesn’t know precisely where he lives then he doesn’t have to torment himself with hopeful expectation for a casual social call that will almost certainly never happen.

“Are you sure you don’t wish to remain here a little longer?” Hannibal is now saying as he sketches an alarmingly detailed map (while Will stands to one side and insists, with increasing desperation, that it’s really not necessary to go to such trouble). “If you wait a few hours it would be far easier to find a Hackney carriage. Or even an *omnibus*.” The latter is said with a fastidious little shudder, and Will tries to imagine having a life so pampered and rarefied that it precludes any kind of exposure to public transport.

“I’ll be fine,” he says. “I’m used to walking.” Which is true, although he’s still going to be beyond exhausted when he finally does stagger into his room. The expression *dead on one’s feet* comes to mind and he suddenly feels depressed again.

“Do be careful,” says Hannibal meditatively. He’s not smiling as he speaks, and as Will begins the long tramp back home (comfortably enfolded in the new coat) he finds himself reflecting on the words. *Be careful*. Take care, watch out; mind how you go. It could be interpreted as either a threat or a caution, particularly when uttered in such a serious way, but Will can’t help veering towards a third option – that rather than warning of danger ahead, Hannibal was issuing him with an invitation to be safe. He hasn’t yet fully realised how a single thing can be both a summons to comfort and a portend of danger – how the grimy leering antagonist might also be the saving grace in disguise, and how the thing that nearly destroys you may well be the thing that sets you free. These are the types of thing philosophers mull over and poets rhapsodise about; why should Will care? And while it might generally be true that ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,’ Nietsche’s thoughts about it aren’t going to be published in English for another ten years; and even if they *were* available it’s hardly the type of thing Will is going to read, being too preoccupied with survival and the preservation of life – and conversely, the violent destruction of it – to have the luxury of pondering the nuances of the human soul. It’s hard to deconstruct life when it takes every resource you have (and several that you don’t) to simply try and sustain it. Yet despite that – despite all of it – many months later he’s going to remember this moment.

Out in the streets the newsboys are already setting up their carts. It’s far too early for the death of Charlotte Tate to have reached the printing press, but the previous murder is still providing more than sufficient grist to the journalistic mill. Will averts his eyes and trudges on. Dawn is starting to break now, streaking the sky with vermillion and purple hues that make it resemble something truly broken – bruised and bleeding – while the air grows less vaporous and the fog slinks away to lie in wait for nightfall. In the distance he thinks he can see the silver thread of the Thames (it’s actually the Serpentine, but the impulse is still the same) so imagines the boats on it bound for unknown destinations. They represent liberation

and escape: of evading responsibility and dodging duty, and finding a place for yourself where you can be happy, safe and free with someone who cares about you beyond what usefulness you can serve. Somewhere with dogs. Will sighs again and thrusts his hands deeper into his pockets. In reality the possibility of such an idyll (whether sailed to by boat or trekked to on foot) seems as remote as being able to fly, and as he turns the next corner he catches sight of another hoard of newspaper placards that tether him to the nature of what he's going to have to do, what he's *always* had to do. And he knows it makes no difference that he didn't choose this; because the command, now as ever, remains the same.

Time to go to work.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to DaringD for suggestions about how to open this chapter :-)

Also, I was just re-reading Chapter 4 and noticed that Hannibal said "bedsides" to Will instead of "besides." PAGING DR FREUD.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If this type of killer appears unprecedented then so, undeniably, is the level of fear and fascination with him. Will thinks there might be several reasons for it. It's partly the recent advent of mass-circulation newspapers, which ensure the crimes garner a level of publicity that would have been impossible only a few years previously. And it's the unfeasibly vicious nature of the murders themselves, almost incomprehensible to a general public who have never heard of 'post mortem mutilation' (and whose innocent ignorance Will is deeply envious of). But it's also, undeniably, the name itself: those three startling, sinister, sensationalised words that have captured people's imaginations and, in doing so, invested the Ripper with a number of intriguing characteristics (cunning, charisma, extreme intelligence) that Will, weary veteran of numerous similar cases in the States, is convinced the actual man will in no way possess. It's a like a tattered, moth-eaten tailor's dummy that's been strewn with silk and pearls to liven it up; and it's ensured that the killer morphs into a symbol onto which people can project anything they choose – and in doing so elevate him from something sordid and contemptible into a form of evil that's so imposing in its magnificence that it warrants chinks of wary respect to insinuate their way in between all the terror. Caricatures in the numerous Penny Dreadfuls often depict him in top hat and tails, slinking through the slums and alleyways like some dapper aristocrat on their way to the opera. *Artist's Impression of the Ripper* is always printed underneath with a lack of irony that makes Will want to scream.

Yet no matter how misplaced the glorification (after all, none of the newspapers care that poverty takes hundreds more lives per day in the East End then the Ripper could ever claim to his credit), there's a general consensus among the Scotland Yard CID that the death of Charlotte Tate is the event that tips the simmering fear into outright terror and triggers a media frenzy that makes the previous coverage look positively restrained in comparison. "It lit the powder keg," says Jack to anyone who'll listen, "it blew the whole godforsaken thing." Suddenly the murders in Whitechapel cease to be a ghoulish curiosity and morbid exhibition for privileged spectators to tut about over their breakfast tables, and instead morph into a disfigured emblem for something far deeper and darker: a carnivorous, underlying decay that's devouring the city from the inside out. Reverends preach to their congregations about it, questions are asked (and left unanswered) in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and even Queen Victoria herself is reported to have expressed concern. The Home Secretary, Mr Matthews, is pelted with eggs in the middle of the street: he's under pressure to offer a reward for any information that leads to the killer's apprehension, but has so far refused on the grounds that the wretched tenants of London's East End are so desperate they'll do anything for money and that the offer would therefore achieve nothing but swamp the police with a tide of false accusations. The self-appointed Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, comprising mostly local tradesmen and concerned volunteers, offer their own reward instead; but still no one comes forward to identify the Ripper as one of their own. And then the telegraphs begin to arrive: appearing daily from all over the world – threats, queries, insinuations, enquiries of more or less (but mostly less) value – from the Americas and the

Antipodes and all four corners of Europe, and all destined to find their home in Scotland Yard where they congregate in an ungainly, accusing heap on Jack Crawford's desk. Will helps him carry them to the furnace where the two of them stand, their faces flickering infernally in the light, as the missives are slowly cremated: dancing and writhing in the flames.

"I feel like one of us should be making a quip about consignment to the hell fires," says Jack, attempting levity; but the hell fires aren't exactly the kind of thing that lend themselves to ready witticism, and in the end they just stand there in despondent silence. On the way home Will passes a man in a handmade sandwich board: elderly and abandoned-looking, hugging himself beneath his wooden flanks as if in pain, and rather alarming in the way his eyes twitch and loll within his gaunt face. '*Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'* is smeared across the front in angry black letters and on the back, in a script which is smaller but no less ardent: '*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*.' Will turns his eyes to the pavement and walks on.

*****

After three successive nights of violent nightmares (including a particularly bad one that causes Mrs Bloom and her lamp to rush upstairs again in alarm) Will finally succumbs to temptation and buys some laudanum. The little phial clinks in his pocket like a dirty secret and he feels incredibly ashamed of himself – disgusted, even – but can't quite muster enough disapproval to dispose of it entirely. The internal arguments regarding its possession follow a depressingly repetitive course: shame and reproach, almost for the sake of it, before arriving at the inevitable justification that: *it's hardly my fault if I need some help*. And this last part, at least, is true because he feels haunted by the investigation, *plagued* by it; it gives him no respite whether asleep or awake and the spectre of Charlotte Tate's small, ruined frame with its attendant pageant of horror and misery flickers inside his mind both night and day. It's the helplessness as much as anything: he knows the other officers on the case feel the same. The lack of anything concrete to do; the sense of being acted on rather than acting for oneself. As if the Ripper has harvested all the luck, leaving none going spare for anyone else.

In this respect Will's also received no word from Hannibal since their late-night, underground *tête-à-tête* and isn't entirely sure what the etiquette should be for arranging a further meeting. Would it be better to wait until called for, or simply go round himself? Technically it's Hannibal that's doing him the favour, so surely it's a bit presumptuous to expect the latter to make all the arrangements as well…but then what if Hannibal is busy (he does after all, appear the type of person who'll be eternally busy with industrious, high-minded things) and might resent Will just turning up on his doorstep? Will chews fretfully on his thumbnail, arduously assessing the possible pros and cons, and then groans slightly at the nudge of pain around the temples which signal the familiar beginnings of a headache. Oh to hell with it – if Hannibal doesn't want to talk he can always tell Will to fuck off; there's no doubt he'd be more than capable. For some reason he's unable to quite name, Will doesn't feel like telling Jack where he's going so simply grabs the new coat and creeps out of Scotland Yard in silence, head ducked and eyes cast down like a penitent. Absolving for what? Will doesn't really know.

Once outside he has a sudden burst of energy that's probably not dissimilar to what an animal might feel on emerging from a cage, so runs down the steps two at a time and takes off his hat in order to feel the breeze in his hair. When he gets to the bottom he unfastens his collar and crumples his necktie into his pocket, and is preparing to strike off down Charing Cross when he's startled by a sudden voice calling out "*Mr Graham!*" Will's preferred response when hailed in the street is generally to ignore it, but on this occasion he's so struck by hearing another American accent that he spins round in spite of himself and is promptly met with the sight of a young man with a pale, pinched face who's standing just a few feet away and staring at him with a rather unsettling intensity. Without breaking eye contact the man's face arranges itself into a crooked little smile as he slowly and deliberately holds up last week's copy of *The London Times* and proceeds to wave it back and forward like it's a pendulum. "You're Will Graham aren't you?" he says in a quiet, insinuating tone.

Will is briefly tempted to deny it, although supposes he can hardly do so when he's being confronted with a large picture of himself (helpfully labelled 'Will Graham' in block capitals) so grudgingly admits that this is indeed the case.

"I thought so," says the pale young man. "I recognised you. It's quite a coincidence Mr Graham, it really is. You see I only arrived in London a few months before you did." He pauses and then gives Will a significant glance. "Originally I'm from Baltimore."

Will feels his mouth go totally dry, but squares his shoulders and makes a determined effort to appear unmoved. Then he steels himself for some sort of confrontation, accusation, or general altercation of the 'and I know *exactly* what you did while you were there' variety. But the young man doesn't say anything else, just continues staring; and Will is beginning to scroll through assorted possible responses (including 'Small world,' 'So what?', and 'Fuck Baltimore') when the other man abruptly takes a step closer so that he's almost, but not quite, pushing beyond the bounds of invasiveness. Will hesitates for a few seconds, reluctant to give any indication of being intimidated but likewise struck by a strong sense of aversion to being any closer to this unsettling individual than is absolutely necessary. Aversion and bravado temporarily tussle together and then the young man's rather feral face breaks into another vulpine smile as his eyes begin to flicker up and down like he's trying to commit Will's features to memory: at which point aversion finally wins and Will shifts slightly back. Oh fuck this – fuck the whole thing. "I'm afraid I have to be going," he says in the type of tone that indicates he's not sorry at all. "I've got an appointment and I'm running late."

The young man gives a small regretful sigh, accessorised with yet another crawling smile and chased up with a piercing gimlet-eyed stare for good measure. "I understand," he says earnestly. "Well I guess I might be seeing you around then Mr Graham. Now that I know where to find you."

"Unlikely," snaps Will. "I'm extremely busy."

"Yeah I suppose you are; seeing how you're *the* Will Graham. But I might see you around all the same, now that I've broken the ice and all. You might actually like talking to me Mr Graham. Y'know? I figure we may have a few things in common."

This is such an outlandish statement that Will temporarily finds himself lost as how best to respond, and before he can properly gather himself the man has melted away into the crowd

almost as abruptly as he first appeared leaving Will standing alone on the pavement and beset by an uneasy sense of foreboding. *Oh God*, he thinks gloomily, *what fresh bullshit is this*? Not that he's really got any spare resources to give the situation, his allotment of existing worries being more than sufficient to keep him occupied. Perhaps better just to forget about it? Then he tries to console himself that the young man didn't actually appear threatening in any obvious way, merely creepily over-enthusiastic. Maybe it really is nothing more significant than a rather credulous, impressionable person who's far from home and has over-identified with what seems like a familiar face. In fact it probably *is* nothing more than that. It almost certainly isn't…is it? Will frowns to himself, unsure of how convincing this line of reassurance really is. Not that there's much he can do about either way; and it hardly makes sense to start inventing problems before they've even materialised. Nevertheless he still changes his mind about walking to Hannibal's house and hails a cab instead.

Harley Street is subdued and quiet when he arrives and there's something instantly soothing about so much rarefied elegance. There are no screaming newspaper placards here, no beggars or urchins, no feral young men, nor wraith-like elderly ones either who traipse the street to warn the unrepentant about the devil. Mary answers the door almost immediately and Will braces himself for a repeat of the previous battle to gain admittance, but she must have received instructions of some kind because this time he's shown straight in. He gives her his hat but hangs onto the coat on the grounds of wanting to show he's still appreciative of it, and Mary gives a bob of the head (no curtsey though, thank God) and ushers him through to the consulting room. Hannibal is in the chair by the fireplace and sitting extremely still; almost abnormally so, like one of Madame Tussaud's famous waxworks. In fact he's so rigid and static that Will is half-worrying he's had some kind of seizure (oh God…*has* he?), but Mary is evidently used to it because she merely clears her throat politely and says "Sir," at which point Hannibal's eyes abruptly swivel in her direction.

"Inspector Graham is here to see you," says Mary. Hannibal's eyes obliging revolve towards Will. "Shall you be needing anything sir? The fire built up perhaps?"

"Everything is perfectly fine, thank you," comes the leisurely reply. He shows no evidence of being startled, which makes Will suppose that he was fully aware of them the entire time. Although if that *is* the case, why not acknowledge their presence when they came in? It's… odd. Will shuffles his feet awkwardly, and Mary performs one of her neat little curtseys (obviously considering Hannibal a more deserving recipient of them) and then discreetly closes the door behind her so it's just the two of them

"Good afternoon Will," says Hannibal in the same smooth, smoky voice that Will remembers from before. "The coat looks very becoming."

"Yes, I…"

Hannibal holds up a hand to stem the renewed flow of stammered appreciation. "And how are you?"

"Fine. I'm fine. Thank you. Yourself?"

"I am *very* well," replies Hannibal, running his eyes over Will's face in a way that's vaguely unnerving. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I was starting to suspect you had gone to

ground."

"Hardly," says Will, propping himself against the desk. Hannibal raises his eyebrows quizzically. "Well maybe a *little*. But don't say 'gone to ground.' You're making me sound like a…" Will trails off, trying to think of a dignified analogy, but ultimately finds that the task is beyond him because the only thing that comes to mind is a badger – and standing in the middle of Hannibal's elegant consulting room self-identifying with a badger is clearly a line which should not be crossed. "Like an *animal*," he finally says.

"Well most animals subsist on their wits," replies Hannibal, "and in addition can be considered as wily, wary and a little bit wild." He pauses and smiles, rather affectionately. "So the metaphor is not entirely inappropriate."

"If you say so," answers Will in a sulky voice.

"I do say so. Although you are clearly still dissatisfied. Perhaps, after all, it is merely a question of finding a suitable animal. Let me think…Ah yes, I have it now. Tell me, are you familiar with the Sherlock Holmes stories; *The Adventure of the Crooked Man*?"

"Not really, no."

"What about *The Jungle Book*?"

"No."

"A pity. Then you shall to take my word for it that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Mr Rudyard Kipling have both been obliging enough to solve our problem for us. What you are," says Hannibal with a slight flourish, "is a mongoose."

"Oh for God's sake, did you just call me a *mongoose*? You did, didn't you – an actual mongoose."

"I did."

"A large *weasel*," says Will gloomily.

"Not at all. They are rather fascinating creatures – quite ingenious, as far as such things go, and with considerable courage and tenacity. In this respect they are deservedly renowned for their peerless skills in the pursuit and destruction of venomous snakes."

"I don't want to be a mongoose," says Will, before realising – too late – that this is very possibly the stupidest thing he's ever said in his life. Hannibal, however, appears to take it more seriously because he pauses and briefly looks thoughtful before adding: "No, I don't suppose you do. And yet you can't seem to find your way to call off the hunt." Will blinks a few times and Hannibal adds pointedly: "And how is the investigation proceeding?"

Instead of answering Will rolls his eyes and Hannibal responds with the faintest flicker of a smile. "You confided your insights to Jack Crawford?"

“Our insights – yes, I did. And his response was exactly the same as when I told him the letter was a hoax, or that the current series of murders are separate to the previous ones.”

“How frustrating for you,” says Hannibal with another little imperious wave of the hand.

“It’s ridiculous; completely ridiculous. If *I* was in charge…” Will trails off, frowning mutinously.

“You are not destined to be in charge.” The frown intensifies. “No, do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting you would not be competent, rather that you are better suited as a rebel and a dissident than as a leader. Your forte, just like mine, is in challenging and provoking the consensus rule; not managing it. Control and administration is always going to be the lot of more conventional minds.”

Will glances up at this and then the frown abruptly dissolves to be replaced by one of his rare, bright smiles, which to Hannibal appears as something rather radiant: like freshly minted coins – sunlight, spun gold – or the way the marble glistens in the *Piazza della Signoria* after the rain passes off. Such rhapsodising is not customary (one could almost call it… sentimental) and Hannibal takes a moment to inspect what is undoubtedly an unfamiliar imperative in respect to other human beings. But nevertheless there it is, and it’s pointless to waste time disputing or denying it. It is merely a return to first principles, to Marcus Aurelius: there is something rather luminous about Will and, ergo, the smile must be considered as radiant. Hannibal examines the notion one final time and then tenderly stores it away before rearranging himself into the depths of the chair and neatly and efficiently refocusing his attention on the conversation.

“…most of *them* seem to think it’s the women’s fault for endangering themselves,” Will is now saying. “As if the Ripper can be partly excused on the grounds that his victims didn’t earn an ‘honest living’.”

“Honesty in the pursuit of one’s living is overvalued,” replies Hannibal crisply. “For most of this city’s inhabitants – although admittedly it is far worse for women – the only means of honest subsistence is slaving within a factory or similar, and essentially represents a slow, excruciating, protracted death from disease or exhaustion. I see you look disapproving, yet surely it is not so very different in your own country?”

Will briefly thinks of *The Communist Manifesto* and *Discourse on Inequality* currently lurking in his trunk and wonders whether or not to mention them. “I suppose so,” is all he says, before adding in a shaper tone of voice: “Although don’t you have servants yourself?”

“I do; whom I remunerate accordingly. Although not merely from a spirit of social equity, you understand, but in exchange for their loyalty. In this regard we arrange a transaction between ourselves, because it is extremely convenient to have employees who will act in one’s interests and only observe what you tell them to.”

Will gives a small frown, once again struck by the sense that a double-meaning is being lavishly spread across the words like butter, but ultimately decides he’s too tired and headachey to properly pursue it and in the end just sighs and returns to the previous theme: “The poverty here…the deprivation. It’s *terrible*. Is anything ever done?”

“Nothing is ever done,” says Hannibal, admiring the way Will’s eyes flash when he becomes animated…really, it’s almost as if they’re *glittering*. “As far as I am aware the only real assistance these women are ever offered comes courtesy of The Christian Reform Society, who tender divine salvation without any clear practical suggestions for maintaining bodily integrity during the interval. No doubt they mean well, but what they fail to appreciate is that God has taken it upon Himself to dispense only sufficient sustenance to the world to furnish the needs of several thousand souls with good food and warm clothing, not to mention education, sanitation and accommodation – leaving *wholly* inadequate supplies for the billions of others who require the same.” Hannibal smiles thinly. “This, of course, is God’s idea of entertaining Himself.”

Will tries (and fails) to look shocked and Hannibal smiles again, this time rather complacently. “As you have no doubt observed I am *extremely* irreligious,” he adds. “Indeed, I possess the kind of mindset that means when I leave my bed every morning, the Almighty almost certainly gives an involuntary shudder and remarks: ‘How unfortunate. It seems that *he* is awake again.’”

This makes Will laugh out loud, even as (particularly because) he’s thinking of the assorted Church societies back home (Baptist, Episcopalian, Evangelist…tedious) and how *utterly* scandalised they would be by such flagrant heresy. Indeed, in this respect, there’s something about Hannibal’s mocking, adversarial stance which is somehow more shocking than outright atheism. Not that Will himself is particularly shocked; he isn’t really sure whether or not he believes in God, it not being an issue he’s ever bothered spending much time over (and it’s not like he’s never had much reason to suspect that God believes in him).

He catches Hannibal’s eye and smiles again then, somewhat reluctantly, reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket to retrieve the police reports that he wants to discuss and thus turn the visit to some purpose. Unfortunately the bundle of documents (folded into a stout wedge in order to fit) are now showing a stubborn refusal to work their way out again. *Oh fuck the lot of you*, thinks Will with mounting irritation, *you complete bastards*; which he’s aware is somewhat ridiculous – as if they’re sentient beings who are misbehaving on purpose – yet nevertheless no amount of vigorous tugging is sufficient to convince them to move, and the papers and Will promptly engage in silent battle for a period of nearly a minute while Hannibal observes the whole thing with an expression of rapt fascination, as if the sight of Will having a fight with his pocket is the most charming thing mortal eyes ever beheld. A final wrench is enough to work the documents free from their dark hiding place, but Will’s triumph is short-lived because in the resulting confusion the bottle of laudanum becomes dislodged and tumbles out as well. It hits the ground with a jolly little bounce before rolling across the floor; and Will watches its progress in mute horror, miserably aware that it is far too much to hope for that Hannibal won’t immediately see it and recognise what it is.

In this regard the bottle bounds across the rug almost *joyfully* with a precision that should surely defy known scientific laws (*you malevolent little shit*, thinks Will) and comes to rest close to Hannibal’s right foot, who proceeds to pick it up and examine it before raising a suggestive eyebrow and leaning forward to return it. “Please be careful with that,” he says pointedly. “I should be extremely sorry if I had to come and carry you out of the depths of some opium den.”

Will, who has risen out of his seat to retrieve the bottle, flushes when he hears this and then rather than sit down again, proceeds to pace about on the rug. Hannibal watches him do it with something close to fondness. He's already noted that Will, fluid and loose-limbed as he is, seems more comfortable roving around the room and leaning against furniture than he does sitting stiff and straight-backed in a chair – and that while the habit would be unbearably irritating in anyone else, in this case such restiveness is rather captivating. *You are not designed for confinement are you*, thinks Hannibal idly. *You should be roaming free*.

"There's a very large gap between a bottle of laudanum and an opium den," Will finally snaps, embarrassment making him defensive. "And even if there wasn't, it would hardly be your responsibility to take it upon yourself to carry me out." He half wants to add something along the lines of Hannibal behaving as if he's Will's father (complete with a disdainful adolescent snorting noise to emphasise the point) but is aware that it would sound so incredibly juvenile that not even the presence of the beard would be enough to salvage it. There's a slight pause; Hannibal continues regarding him with the same implacable stare…oh God. "Look, I'm sorry," Will says, deliberately lowering his voice before slipping back into the chair. "That was very ungracious. I appreciate your concern."

"Not at all," says Hannibal calmly. "You are quite right; I am being overly solicitous. You are an adult and perfectly entitled to choose your preferred source of respite without any sermonising from me." He runs his eyes over Will in a subtle yet leisurely way. "And do remain standing if you prefer."

"No, it's fine, I'll sit," replies Will, oblivious to the admiration and assuming he's merely being humoured instead. There's another pause. "I'm very aware of the dependency risks," he adds, suddenly looking rather young and earnest. "I intend to use it sparingly."

"Might I ask why you intend to use it at all?"

Will hesitates, darting his tongue over his lips before staring owlishly at Hannibal from over the top of his glasses. *Is this it then*, he thinks: the start of their peculiar agreement? That would mean he's expected to tell the truth…although there's not really that much point lying about it; why does anyone use laudanum after all? "Partly for pain relief," he says. "I still get bad headaches." He hesitates in spite of himself and Hannibal's eyes narrow.

"Partly? Why else?"

"I need…" Will falters again, trying to think of an effective way of phrasing it. "I need a sedative."

"And might I ask why?"

"The work I do."

"Yes?"

"It's…" Christ, how to even *begin* to describe it? He finally settles on the wholly inadequate: "It's difficult."

“A strain?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal leans forward in his chair. “Tell me why.”

“Why do you think?” says Will irritably.

“Please do not deflect. Of course the nature of the work speaks for itself; and yet that nature, and your strain, continue to co-exist. It is that synchronicity which interests me. So let me rephrase: why do you force yourself to do it?”

Will wonders, rather hysterically, what Hannibal would do if he simply turned round now and announced: ‘*My dear fellow – fucked if I know’;* or even *‘because I am wise in the ways of the mongoose*.’ “Because I’m good at it,” he finally says.

“You feel obliged?”

“Yes. I get results.”

“Indeed, you get results. So to repeat: tell me why.”

Will takes a deep breath, lets it out again, falters for a few seconds, and then glances up – suddenly anxious and unsure. Hannibal leans further forward and fixes him with one of his concentrated stares. “Tell me why Will,” he says again.

There’s something about the tone which is very measured and soothing – more like an invitation than a request – and Will hears himself admitting, without even fully intending to: “Because of the way I can think.”

Hannibal coils back into the chair, steeples his fingers together beneath his chin and gifts Will with a particularly piercing look before saying: “Please explain” in the same soft voice. If he’s impatient with the constant evasion he’s not anywhere close to showing it, but Will equally knows that he’s not going to desist until he receives an answer he’s satisfied with. And – shockingly – Will isn’t even sure anymore that he even wants him to stop.

“It’s hard to describe,” he replies, a bit desperately.

“Please try,” repeats Hannibal after a pause. He’s now unfeasibly still and it makes Will think of an eerie museum specimen: a piece of sculpture with swivelling eyes, or a metal manikin that moves without an operator. Living taxidermy. As if his attention is so entirely wrapped around Will that any other movement or gesture is surplus to requirement. Will, in turn, sighs very softly and slumps forward until his elbows are resting on his knees and Hannibal scrutinises him the entire time, proprietary yet protective; like a child willing a favourite doll to retain the pose in which its been placed and bear the arrangement without toppling down.

“It’s because I see the aftermath of a crime in a way that’s very…*unique*,” Will finally says. He gives a rather humourless laugh and rakes his hand through his hair. “I don’t just see what’s left behind; I can recreate it.” Even as he’s speaking he’s aware of a deep incredulity that he’s confided this so quickly; served up his vulnerability in all its raw, flayed fragility

with so little resistance. What happened to his previous determination to evade and postpone? He's not entirely sure, only that there's something about Hannibal's placid yet unrelenting invitation to unburden himself that's almost impossible to resist. Perhaps this is the kind of relief people seek from the confessional? *Forgive me father, for I have sinned*. Except surely confession shouldn't feel so…seductive. As if he's being enticed into telling the truth and is willing, in turn, to sit to one side and watch himself be lured in. Coaxed and caressed with nothing but words and posture and a certain tone of voice: such simple snares compared to the years of threats and blustering coercion from assorted colleagues and family members, and all of which have slid off with varying lack of success. Yet even as he's aware of it – aware of all of it; *painfully* aware – he can't quite bring himself to feel regret at the disclosure.

"A process of reconstruction," replies Hannibal thoughtfully. "You step sideways from out of your own time and into someone else's."

"Yes," says Will eagerly, because – *yes*, God, how is it even possible that someone should be able to understand? "Exactly. It's like…it's like I can inhabit the same awareness as the killer. I can assume their perspective; envisage the crime from their point of view. What they thought, what they felt; their strategy. Their design."

"*Can* you?" says Hannibal. The reply is ostensibly uttered in his customary deadpan voice; but if Will were less preoccupied with his own revelation, he'd undoubtedly detect a flicker of energy beneath the calm delivery that's not usually there. As it is, he merely glances up in hopeful disbelief – because of all the possible reactions he was expecting (running the full gamut from revulsion to mocking scepticism) the one thing he didn't anticipate was such coolly contemplative acceptance.

"What extremely singular circumstances in which to be placed," Hannibal adds after a pause. "Your entire life revolves around intuiting depravity from the point of view of the depraved."

"Well…If you want to put it that way."

"I have no particular desire to put it any way – it is merely the way that it is. You assume your perspective and you study the resulting panorama."

"Yes."

"And yet…is it not becoming increasingly difficult to make yourself look?"

"Yes."

"Because you have to look alone?"

"*Yes*."

"But you force yourself to look regardless, and you unmask monsters – irrespective of the flagellation you impose upon yourself to do so."

"No, it's not…God, you're making me sound like a masochist."

“No,” says Hannibal, quick as a whip. “Masochism would imply some kind of gratification; and it does *not* gratify you.”

Will swallows audibly; starting to struggle with the dual imperatives of resenting (and fearing) the way Hannibal appears able to slip so effortlessly inside his mind whilst simultaneously cherishing the novel sensation of someone appearing to understand him. It’s like being split in two – neatly dissected into right and wrong – and images of scalpels come to mind, Will’s innermost thoughts glistening on the blades like blood. His head is beginning to throb again as if in sympathy. “It doesn’t,” he eventually replies. His voice in his own ears sounds strained and thin. “No.”

“Indeed no. On the contrary. In fact ‘martyr’ would be a better term, wouldn’t it – because it is destroying you. You are tormented by it. Aren’t you Will? You are sacrificing your sensitive young self in the service of *righteousness*. Pinning your colours to the mast of virtue; marching with the Christian soldiers. And yet fighting the good fight with such very *bad* instruments. You see your mindset as distorted and dysfunctional – monstrous – only defensible in terms of its effectiveness.”

“Yes,” says Will faintly. *Yes yes yes*. It’s a spacious room, yet everything suddenly feels too small and confined; as if the surroundings are shrinking or Will himself is swelling and bloating with the weight of everything that’s broiling inside his head. Like Alice in Mr Carroll’s celebrated book, plummeting down the rabbit hole. *Eat me. Drink me. We’re all mad here*.

“And yet you don’t understand the possibility of inspiration,” Hannibal is now saying. His face, illuminated in the flickering glow of the fire, looks even more unworldly than usual: as planed and fleshless as a death’s head from the brush of some Renaissance Old Master. "Tell me: that man the other night, the one who tried to assault you – would you have killed him if you had to?”

Will blinks a few times, temporarily distracted from the growing pain in his head and badly disorientated by this abrupt and unsettling question. “Yes,” he says after a slight pause.

“Yes,” repeats Hannibal softly. “Yes; indeed you would have done. I misjudged that situation didn’t I? I knew it as soon as I spoke to you. You were frightened; but not just of him. Not really. The *true* source of the fear was that you were feeling what you believe you should not allow yourself to feel. It was the thrill of anticipation wasn’t it? The scent of blood in the air. So tell me this – if you had been forced to kill him; if I had not arrived when I did and the confrontation grew out of hand…how would you have felt afterwards?”

Will shifts uncomfortably in his chair. He realises his eyes are shut, although he doesn’t remember closing them. “I’m not sure…” he eventually says. “I don’t know.”

“And do you still think about him now: how he repelled you, the outrage you felt towards him? The satisfaction of retribution – the way it would feel. Do you imagine it?”

“I…I don’t know,” says Will. Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “I *don’t*.”

Hannibal now merely gives a quick nod, as if this reticence is exactly what he was expecting. "You say you don't know; and yet you are so *very* imaginative. I suspect you could envisage it if you really tried, but you fight so hard to suppress the urge. It's the essence of your torment isn't it? You try to entomb it, but it won't remain quiet in its crypt. It is buried in a shallow grave, isn't it Will? Buried alive. And it appals you; it makes you despise yourself. The thought of what might happen if you cultivate the inspiration."

"Well obviously," snaps Will. "Wouldn't you hate *your*self? Wouldn't anyone?"

"I have never experienced the sensation of hating myself," replies Hannibal smoothly. "It is an extremely pleasant state in which to live and I would advise you to try it. Regarding your second proposition; would 'anyone'? Well, in terms of the average person – if we may presume to speak on their behalf – then in its crudest and rawest form; yes. Of course yes. And I in turn am hardly advocating clumsy, brutal *murder* to you." Pause. Smile. "But recall what I said to you when we first met. I called you an alchemist didn't I? Purifying and reifying the base elements into the noble ones. The capacity to transform the limping, ugly and despoiled into something beautiful. You can't imagine how your mind could ever be made beautiful, can you Will? Perhaps one day you might; to learn to *thrive* rather than merely *survive*."

Hannibal's voice is low and hypnotic and Will has an abrupt memory of reading about the Indian fakirs and their capacity to charm snakes: how the two weave and undulate together, moving with the synchronicity of lovers and constructing a mutual seduction through sound. But that surely can't be the right analogy because it would mean that Will himself was the snake…and aren't they supposed to be loathsome and wicked? Images of serpents come to mind; the Garden of Eden, forbidden fruit. The Book of Revelations: *And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world*…it must have been all that talk about God earlier. Not that he can really focus anymore because the headache really has returned with a vengeance, pulsing and throbbing almost in rhythm to the crooning voice from across the room. He grips onto the arms of the chair, starting to panic. So much pain; surely it's not possible to endure it? Surely no one could? He tries to remember the quote from the play that he repeated to himself the mortuary – "*Screw your courage to the sticking place"* – but another line from the same performance keeps thrusting it out of the way. Something about blood. There was so much stage blood; so much more viscous and scarlet than the real thing. The actor was dripping with it: "*I am in blood stepped in so far that should I wade no more*"…Oh God maybe he really is going mad? Then he can hear Hannibal asking "Are you all right Will?" even though he sounds as if he's very far away, rippling and muffled like someone submerged underwater.

"Yes…no," replies Will, his voice stretched taut with pain. "It's my head." He can see what looks like a long shadow flowing across the room and realises Hannibal is walking towards him.

"How frequently does this occur?" Hannibal is saying.

"I don't know….A few times a week…It's been worse ever since I was ill." Now he can feel a hand on his shoulder and desperately tries to focus on the sensation; something real and palpable in the midst of all the screaming internal chaos.

Hannibal sighs slightly, a low rustling noise like silk slithering onto the floor. “You really need to re-evaluate your relationship with your occupation,” he says. “Conflict like this is not sustainable and in the long-term is going to wreak substantial damage.”

Will groans quietly, and it’s partly pain and partly confusion – because just like that the dynamic has shifted again, and Hannibal is being a normal doctor and Will is being a normal police officer who came to consult over a crime and has suddenly become a patient (also normal) by virtue of an unexpected headache. And he doesn’t know which versions of themselves are the real ones, or – even more confusingly – if this is even a sensible question to ask.

Hannibal is now standing behind Will’s chair, tipping Will’s head back so he can inspect his pupils. “You should not be concerned,” he is saying. “While I can imagine that you fear a relapse of your previous complaint, you do not appear in any way feverish. This is nothing more alarming than a tension headache; albeit a severe one. If you will permit me?”

Will makes another small groaning noise, which briefly gets louder (and then cuts off entirely) as he feels a warm, firm hand smooth over his forehand and another one slide across the base of his neck. The hands rub in small, soothing circles before shifting to massage his aching temples, each stroke firm and purposeful yet surprisingly deft.

“I know it is difficult, but try and calm yourself,” says Hannibal gently. “Panicking will make it worse.”

Will doesn’t reply but allows himself to lean into the touch, eyes screwed closed and lips slightly parted, while Hannibal tenderly cradles his head. “Good boy,” Hannibal adds in a voice that’s even softer than previously and more caressing, if possible, than the feel of his hands. “That’s very good. Perfect; just like that. Let me help you.” Will briefly feels a thumb brushing across the top of his cheekbone and emits an involuntary sigh that’s somewhat breathy and low-pitched, but which he can’t reproach himself for too much because the reduction in pain is so blissful. He’s not entirely sure if it’s *all* that’s blissful…but surely now is hardly the time to examine it too closely?

“Better?” asks Hannibal.

Will blinks a few times, suddenly aware that he has absolutely no idea how long they’ve been like this. To his enormous mortification he’s briefly tempted to lie and say ‘no’; but prevents himself on the grounds that Hannibal is probably desperate to stop and sit down again – and besides, he can hardly sit here all evening having his freakish head massaged. “Much,” he says instead. “Thank you.” To his even deeper embarrassment, he also realises that at some point he’s managed to take hold of Hannibal’s jacket with his right hand and is still clinging onto it like a needy five year old (seriously…what the actual fuck?). Flushing slightly he lets go and folds his hands in his lap in an exaggeratedly formal manner.

Hannibal makes as if to move away, but at the last minute can’t resist taking the opportunity to gently card his fingers through Will’s hair as a farewell gesture; noting, as he does so, all the different shades concealed within it: rich bands of chestnut, the occasional coppery strand of auburn; even one or two faint traces of blond entwined with the more prominent sable and

chocolate tones. Will, oblivious to the admiration, leans almost unperceptively into the touch and Hannibal sighs to himself before reluctantly letting go and taking a step back.

“I should go,” says Will gloomily, who’s now feeling self-conscious but also disorientated, because he still can’t quite work out what just happened. Now the bleeding edge of the pain has receded the previous exchange has taken on a vaguely surreal air – like something from his previous fever dreams.

“If you wish,” replies Hannibal casually, before adding: “Although there is no need to leave on my account.”

“No…I should go,” repeats Will.

“Very well, but please be good enough to wait a few minutes longer; there are a few items I would like to give you before you leave.” He exits the room so promptly that Will has no opportunity to recite his usual protestations; returning a few minutes later what looks like a scarf, plus some smaller objects that are curled inside his hand and therefore too obscured for Will to properly identify.

“Here,” says Hannibal, handing him the scarf. “It is growing colder all the time and cramped muscles in your neck will exacerbate the headaches.”

The scarf is spun of the softest, supplest wool; long enough to loop several times around Will’s throat and shaded in the deepest tints of blue, shot through with occasional grey and green tones as if fragments of the ocean have been woven into the fabric. “Are you sure?” says Will longingly, who is desperate to possess it while also concerned that it’s too magnificent a gift. “It seems too good to simply give away.” In fact the scarf looks brand new, although surely that can’t be the case? Will tries to imagine Hannibal going to Regent Street and selecting it from one of the more exclusive department stores, striding through the other shoppers in his usual impenetrable way as they part like the Red Sea to let him get past. “*I should like to purchase a gentleman’s scarf*,” he would say, “*cashmere would be preferable, and it must be durable and warm*…” And the assistant: “*Oh yes sir, we have just the thing*…” while Hannibal inspects what’s available and rejects the inferior ones. It’s genuinely impossible to envisage such a scene taking place; not least because why on earth would anyone go to such trouble on Will’s behalf? No doubt it’s an unwanted gift and Hannibal is glad to have the opportunity to rid himself of it. Nevertheless it’s a kind gesture, and Will’s smile when he takes it is unusually sincere.

“I am entirely sure,” says Hannibal with a smile of his own. “In fact I must insist that you accept it. Now *this*,” he brandishes a small cube wrapped in brown paper, “is camphor – for the headaches. You may either apply it directly,” a long finger briefly trails across Will’s forehead from one temple to the other, “or dissolve some in a basin of hot water and inhale it.”

“Thank you,” says Will earnestly. “That’s very kind.”

“So now we have your insulation and your headaches respectively attended to. The contents of the bottle, on the other hand, are a little more singular.” He holds it up for Will to inspect:

a little phial of smoked green glass, smaller than Will's own and not bearing any sign of a pharmacy stamp.

"What is it?"

"It is an alkaloid tincture," replies Hannibal airily. "Far less addictive than laudanum, but generally reported to be equally effective. Take two drops every evening before you go to bed. It is fast acting, mind, so you will fall asleep very promptly."

Will examines the bottle. It's rather striking looking with its squat Dutch base, tapering neck, and the ceramic-topped cork that's printed with a painstakingly tiny image of a Medieval friar: the sort of thing which, taken together, could model extremely well for an illustration in a children's book about magic and potions. Then he reproaches himself for being so fanciful; he sounds like a child himself. "Thank you," he says instead.

"You are quite welcome."

"You say it's as effective as laudanum?"

"More or less."

Will glances at it again, suddenly anxious. "It won't have any side effects will it?" he says. "Nothing unexpected?"

Hannibal opens his dark eyes very wide, as if astonished that such a thing could even be considered. "Side effects?" he repeats after a pause. "No. Not at all."

*****

It's already dark by the time Will gets home and it takes him a while to locate his latchkey, standing haplessly in the gloom and fumbling in both pockets while cursing softly under his breath. Despite the fact he lives here he still can't overcome an uncomfortable urge to knock rather than merely stroll straight in, and the awareness reinforces the unhappy sense that's he's fated to feel like an outsider no matter where he goes. Out of habit he heads to the kitchen in the hope of foraging for something to eat and promptly discovers Mrs Bloom and Miss Verger sat at the table with their heads together and who draw slightly apart when he comes in.

"I'm sorry," says Will, somewhat awkwardly. "I didn't mean to disturb you." And although they reassure him that this is not the case – and genuinely sound as if they mean it – the sense of being an interloper washes over him again with full force. Like he's something ungainly and surplus to requirement: a clumsy third wheel on a barrow that could operate perfectly well with just two.

"We are in the process of acquiring another property," explains Mrs Bloom, gesturing at the documents spread out across the table. "Of course the agent would be very troublesome if he knew he was dealing with two women, so we have been amusing ourselves by presenting our proposal on behalf of fictitious male correspondents." This makes Will smile, partly at the audaciousness of it but also with admiration at the fact he has no doubts they will carry off

the deception entirely successfully; and Miss Verger smiles back and gives him the ghost of a wink before looking at him more carefully from the light of the candle.

“Are you all right Mr Graham?” she says kindly. “You look rather pale.”

“I’m fine, thank you. Just tired.”

They nod understandingly, although unlike his other acquaintances are too tactful and restrained to begin hectoring for details of the investigation. The delicacy is enormously appreciated; even the stationer from whom Will acquires his ink and writing paper always asks for updates and, as far as Will is aware, gives the impression to his other customers that he’s fully versed in all the latest developments of the hunt for the Ripper despite the fact Will always refuses to mention it. He frowns to himself at the memory and makes a mental note to go elsewhere in the future. Although perhaps there’s not much point after all; everyone seems to know who he is and there’s no guarantee it won’t just begin all over again. He has a miserable image of himself traipsing from one shop to another, constantly hounded by other people’s prurient curiosity by virtue of his status as the weird American who hunts murderers, and feels another wave of weary depression at the thought of it.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” he says even though it’s only eight o’clock. “Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.” Although aren’t they always? But in the corner of his eye he can see Miss Verger’s slim hand stealing over Mrs Bloom’s; and while he knows they wouldn’t object to his presence, there’s something hugely dispiriting about being forced to witness cosy intimacy from which you’re firmly excluded. “I’m sorry to have interrupted you,” he adds.

“You really didn’t,” replies Mrs Bloom. “So no apology is necessary. And you are very welcome to stay if you wish.” She smiles mischievously. “Perhaps you can judge whether we have forged sufficiently masculine signatures.”

Will is tempted, but despite an appealing image of the three of them giggling and plotting together by candlelight he can’t quite convince himself that she *really* means it, so repeats his excuses about the forthcoming length of the day (despite the fact it’s a bit of a stupid expression; even the longest day can’t exceed the same 24 hours of the previous one, after all).

“Well, do come down if you change your mind,” says Miss Verger. “By the way, that’s a very lovely scarf.”

“Oh, yes…thank you.”

“New? I don’t believe I’ve seen it before.”

Will suddenly finds he doesn’t want to explain exactly where it came from. “Um, yes,” he says after a slight pause. “A friend sent it from America.”

“They have wonderful taste.”

“I suppose so,” says Will vaguely.

“Yes, it really flatters you. It complements your eyes and complexion.” Will raises his eyebrows incredulously, and she starts to laugh. “Of course men never notice things like that,” she says.

As Will climbs the stairs he reflects ruefully on this phantom version of himself who has friends in America that are sufficiently concerned for his wellbeing that they would use their wonderful taste to send him a scarf to fortify against an English winter. Although perhaps it’s not so *very* far from the truth? After all, isn’t Dr Lec…Hannibal a sort of friend? Sort of. Friendship isn’t the type of thing Will has an extensive amount of experience with, so it’s not all that easy to tell. What constitutes a friend? To be honest, he’s not even sure he’d know what to do with one if they turned up. Friendship, like love, appears rather like garnishing on a meal: desirable yet inessential, and the type of things you can survive without if you have to. Then, unbidden, Hannibal’s earlier words suddenly come to mind – “Perhaps one day you might learn to *thrive* rather than merely *survive*” – and Will frowns slightly, resenting this internal contradiction.

Back in his homely little room with the fire in the grate and his familiar belongings scattered around, the intensity of the meeting seems faint and unreal. It’s like the memory of watching a play; a vicarious sense of drama that happened to someone else. Embarrassing, though, getting the headache like that. Briefly he rubs his fingers over his forehead, mirroring the gentle touch from earlier, and then just as abruptly feels self-conscious so stops doing it. The little phial is sat on the nightstand, looking innocuous enough next to the larger, squatter bottle of laudanum and now he picks it up and examines it. No real side-effects, Hannibal had said. And if it helps him to sleep…

As instructed Will measures two cautious drops and swallows them down, wincing at the bitter sting it creates at the back of his throat. He sways as he replaces the bottle on the nightstand, then staggers to the side and has to clutch onto the bedstead to remain upright. Hannibal said it was fast-acting; although there’s no way it could act *that* fast…is there? He must be more tired than he realised. Getting undressed now feels like too much effort, so he collapses backwards onto the bed with his shirt only half unfastened. His head still aches slightly. Surely there’s no harm in rubbing his forehead…nothing to feel self-conscious over; it was medical advice after all. His own fingers are smaller and slimmer and don’t quite feel the same but it’s better than nothing, so he does it again. And then there’s a sense of calmness and soothing, spiced with a darker undertone of seeing a shadow that flowed across the room…but so soothing nonetheless. He feels like he’s losing consciousness – literally losing it, as if he’s put his awareness down on some foreign surface and is fumbling blindly around, completely unable to locate it again. Losing, losing…lost. Seconds and minutes have abandoned their significance: time has both stopped and hurtled forward, so it feels like all kinds of things have taken place yet he’s not certain what they are. And then there’s silhouettes laced with malign shades, white light bleeding black, more shadows with the light behind them…And then there’s nothing at all except darkness.

Chapter End Notes

The Jungle Book and The Adventure of the Crooked Man were both published a few years after this story is set but I hope I'm forgiven, because – mongoose y'all.

Also. That moment when your boyfriend's dad says "Have you ever seen that programme 'Hannibal'? It's really very good." And you want to reply: "Why yes. Yes I have. I wrote a pornographic novel-length fanfic about it because it torments my MORTAL SOUL. And by the way – Sassy Will." And instead have to go: "Yeah, it is isn't it."

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I had the loveliest surprise this week courtesy of the wonderful Cervolina who's generously shared her time and talent making beautiful art for this fic. Please head over to Tumblr to tell her how great she is, and then check out Will looking super cute (before he drop-kicks his hat down the street) and Hannibal ("no side effects Will, duh") looking super badass, in their respective Victorian gear. And speaking of which rest assured on behalf of both her and myself that Hannibal is only holding a knife on the grounds of being a massive badass, not because he's about to shank Willgram :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes up next morning in a tangled, sweaty bundle within the bedclothes and gingerly raises his head to peer around the room with a wariness that would do justice to one of the metaphorical mongooses (Mongeese? Mongeeses? Oh fuck it, whatever…furry bastards) because he's confused as to how the sun can be out in the middle of the night until a glance at the clock tells him that it's nearly 11 o'clock. This information is neither expected nor entirely welcome, because he hasn't slept through to midday in recent memory and the awareness he's now done so through purely chemical means is rather uncomfortable…a thought which is promptly replaced by the infinitely worse realisation that the inquest for Charlotte Tate – at which he was supposed to be present – is starting in precisely ten minutes time. Will groans out loud with dismay before lurching out of bed and groping for his glasses with one hand and scrabbling for some clean clothes with the other, cursing the perversity of a full night's sleep appearing at such a wretchedly inconvenient time. The expression '*be careful what you wish for'* veers into mind, and he's frantically wondering what possible excuse he can give to Jack Crawford before he notices something that makes him freeze with shock, all thoughts of the inquest temporarily forgotten. Because stranded over by the window is the cane backed chair that ought to be neatly stood by his desk – is *always* stood by the desk – and which couldn't possibly have worked its way so far from home unless someone had pulled it over there during the night. Which means…"Oh fucking *shit*," says Will, a bit despairingly. He hasn't sleepwalked for months; not once, not one single time. *Unbearable* to think it might be beginning again.

Will sidles over to the window, almost cautiously, and takes hold of the chair with both hands. "How did you get over here then?" he says, trying for flippancy in order to calm himself. It's a pretty flimsy thing really, very light and insubstantial as far as furniture goes. And he was so tired last night, stumbling around with it in fact; it's not completely unfeasible that he might have just knocked it out of place. Is it? "I *might* have done," says Will, also out loud, before realising that he's talking to himself – which he promised he wouldn't do – and that given neither he or that fucking chair is any position to provide a meaningful answer then the whole line of enquiry is completely pointless anyway. Then from beyond the window comes the sonorous chime of the church bell sounding out 11 o'clock, and Will groans all

over again at the reminder that, sleepwalking or not, there's still things to do, people to see, and Jack Crawfords to be appeased over inquests which are going to be missed. It takes a colossal application of effort, but he makes a pledge to himself to temporarily forget the whole thing in favour of focussing on the task at hand; then sprints to the washstand to dash his face with cold water before beginning to pull on his clothes with fingers that are numb and fumbling but resolute in spite of it.

For once luck is on Will's side and he locates a cab relatively quickly. Despite there being no conceivable way of attending the actual proceedings, he's hoping he might be able to locate the others on their way out; and sure enough a little whiskery usher directs him into an oak-panelled anteroom on arrival where (rather unbelievably) tea and biscuits appear to be being served and Jack Crawford is holding court to a small group of onlookers. Will slips in silently in an attempt to make as discreet an entrance as possible – whereupon the run of good luck that located the cab promptly expires, and he's foiled in his ambition by the heavy wooden door swinging shut behind him and announcing his arrival with a spectacularly loud clanging noise.

"Ah! Mr Graham!" booms Jack. "How very good of you to join us."

Will can feel several pairs of eyes swivelling round to stare disapprovingly and he flushes in spite of himself. "I'm sorry," he says. "I…um…" Oh *God*, he can't possibly admit he overslept "…I misjudged the time it would get to the coroner's court. And it took me a while to find an available cab."

"It's not his fault Jack, be reasonable," says Price, and Will shoots him a grateful look. "We should have arranged someone to escort him. London is impossible to navigate for newcomers."

Jack grudgingly shuffles and sighs at this, but obviously feels there's sufficient truth in what Price is saying to not pursue the matter further; and Will smiles vaguely and concentrates on looking suitably remorseful while secretly fighting an urge to tell Jack to go and fuck himself. "Well now that you *are* finally here," says Jack pompously, "I'd like to introduce you to our second City Police surgeon – Dr Frederick Chilton."

Will turns and nods obligingly in the direction that Jack is pointing, but doesn't bother saying his own name on the grounds that it's blatantly obvious Dr Chilton couldn't care less who he is (no one in the vicinity, it would seem, being anywhere near as fascinating to Dr Chilton as Dr Chilton is to himself). The latter is tall, statuesque and almost impossibly well-groomed, and Will immediately notices how his eyes constantly slide away from whoever he's talking to in order to gaze lovingly into the large mirror on the opposite wall. Nevertheless, despite a rather affected manner, he doesn't appear to be in possession of the type of idiocy that could blot out the sun in the way predicted by Price.

"You really ought to say 'other'," Dr Chilton is now telling Jack.

"What?"

"*Other* City Police surgeon." Dr Chilton's eyes gravitate back to the mirror, as if pulled by invisible string as he takes a moment to readjust his cravat (Byzantium purple silk with…no

it couldn't possibly be – Will's own eyes narrow incredulously as he looks a bit closer – the initials *FC* embroidered around tiny, tiny Union Jacks). "You said second. Second implies a hierarchy in which Dr Price comes first."

Will discreetly clears his throat to stifle the snort of laughter that's threatening to work its way out, and makes a mental note to revise giving Chilton a free pass on the whole 'idiocy which blots out the sun' hypothesis.

"At any rate," adds the latter with a condescending little smile, "as I was saying *before* we were interrupted…" (the smile now beams in Will's direction. Will clears his throat again) "…as I have said *numerous* times, Dr Price and I really are going to have to come to an agreement over the issue of handedness." Will now remembers this being mentioned as a point of (thoroughly pointless) contention during the actual autopsy and groans inwardly. "Specifically," adds Chilton with a little flourish, "Dr Price needs to concede that this individual's psychological temperament – his disposition, one might say – is entirely consistent with a preference for the left."

Will wonders, rather idly, if he dares tell Dr Chilton that this is clearly bullshit. There's probably no real reason not to – it's hardly as if he's going to be familiar with the expression; and even if he is, would doubtless be far too fastidious to admit it. Price, in turn, shoots Will an incredulous look, as if to imply 'are you *hearing* this?'

"We're all familiar with the advances in phrenology aren't we gentlemen?" continues Chilton, with the manner of someone clearly warming to his theme. "And if you're aware of my most recent monograph on how the principles of physiognomy and moral faculty can be extrapolated to handedness." He pauses and smiles in a self-congratulatory way, as if awaiting respectful applause. "*Well*, then the question of him being right-handed becomes, frankly, quite implausible."

"Bullshit."

"What's that Mr Graham?"

"You might as well say we should throw a suspect in the Thames and determine guilt on whether he floats or not," replies Will tersely. "Linking moral degeneracy with hand dominance is positively *medieval*."

Dr Chilton looks at Will in vague surprise, as if the tea kettle had spoken.

"The medical evidence clearly indicates that he's right-handed," adds Will. "And it would be an absolute travesty if we exclude suspects on the basis of some antiquated notion of rectitude being determined by which hand a person…" – an array of highly inappropriate activities that someone might prefer to perform with a particular hand all rush unhelpfully to mind – "…which hand a person *writes* with."

"Yes, quite," says Price. "Well put Mr Graham. My thoughts precisely."

"We should shake hands on it," replies Will airily.

“Indeed we should.” Price gives him a faint wink. “Both hands in fact; after all, they do say that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Mr Zeller, do you agree?”

“I’m sure he does,” says Will. “Given that he’s your right hand man.”

“Always happy to lend a hand,” replies Zeller with a completely straight face.

“That’s good to know,” says Will earnestly. “Hand on heart.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” adds Price. “And all hands on deck.”

“I *beg* your pardon,” says Dr Chilton. His pursed lips makes a little popping motion as be pronounces the ‘b’ in beg. “Mr Crawford, I really must protest. If Bill here…”

“Will.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name’s Will. You called me Bill.”

“Oh,” says Dr Chilton. “Did I really?”

“Yes. Yes you did.”

“Well they’re both short for William aren’t they?” This is said in an obnoxiously forbearing tone, as if Will is being highly unreasonable in requesting to be called by the right name, but that Dr Chilton (out of the goodness of his heart) is prepared to good-humouredly tolerate it. “Mr Crawford, we cannot allow conjecture to determine our course.”

“Which is exactly what we’d be doing if we dismiss the pathology reports in favour of some unsubstantiated theory about hand dominance,” says Will firmly. In the background he can hear Price softly starting to whistle *The Star Spangled Banner* and struggles not to smile.

“Pathology is not an exact science,” replies Dr Chilton primly.

“Actually, I think you’ll *find*…” begins Price.

Dr Chilton holds up his hand in an imperious way. “I believe a little humility would be more becoming. And as for *you* Mr Will Graham. I’ve been hearing quite a lot about *you*.” He runs his eyes over Will with an expression of intense venom and then glances meaningfully at Jack, who promptly looks embarrassed. “You really ought to come by my asylum some time. A very progressive institution; devoted to understanding the causes and treatments of mental disturbance in addition to containing it. You’d be a *most* prized and welcomed…visitor.”

“All right, that’s *enough*,” snaps Jack with an angry look at Dr Chilton. “You’ve all made your respective points. I’d venture to suggest that you’ve even *laboured* them. Frederick, I take your views into consideration – and with full respect for your expertise – but the consensus opinion favours a right-handed assailant. And unless some compelling evidence arises to the contrary, then that’s going to be our assumption.”

“Hardly an *assumption*,” hisses Price.

“Although assumed by the majority nevertheless,” says Will blithely. “Why don’t we have a vote on it? Perhaps a show of hands?”

“Well in that case I suppose there’s nothing more to be said,” snaps Dr Chilton, making a big performance of pulling on his gloves and fussily adjusting his overcoat. He waves a peremptory finger in Jack’s direction, brandishing it like it’s a loaded gun. “Although you might have saved me the trouble in coming down here when you have no inclination to take my views seriously.”

“Now Frederick, don’t be that way…”

“No, no – I understand. Consensus is certainly the fashion nowadays: democracy, popular opinion, the unthinking masses…that sort of thing. Jack, I bid you good-day. Dr Price. Mr Zeller.”

Will, who is clearly being excluded from this departure ceremony, can’t resist holding up his right hand in a farewell gesture (and struggles to keep a straight face when he sees that Price and Zeller are doing the same). Dr Chilton narrows his eyes then swoops out the room in glorious, bristling outrage that’s rather reminiscent of an operatic *grande dame*: Exit Stage Left.

“I thought he took that rather well,” says Price innocently. “You’ve got to *hand* it to him.”

“Don’t be so ridiculous Jim,” snaps Jack before rounding on Will. “And *you* should have shown a bit more self-restraint. That sarcasm was completely uncalled for.”

“On the contrary it was *sublime*,” says Price in a satisfied tone. “Although I’m afraid you’ve made yourself an enemy there Mr Graham. You watch yourself; Dr Chilton does not forget, nor does he forgive.”

“I’m sure I’ll cope,” replies Will, who’s so used to acquiring adversaries that the procurement of yet one more induces nothing beyond a vague internal sigh. “But I thought he was a medical doctor? Why’s he so preoccupied with ridiculous theories like that?”

“Because he is cognitively challenged and intellectually impaired,” says Price. “Or, in layman’s terms – Mr Zeller, what is Dr Chilton in layman’s terms?”

“An idiot,” replies Zeller. He and Price turn and look at Will with matching beatific smiles.

“Well he’s a *dangerous* idiot. Anyone with his kind of authority who’s so arrogant and unsophisticated is a horrendous risk.”

“I hope you’re listening to this Mr Crawford?” says Price.

“Well at least Dr Chilton turned up on time,” says Jack peevishly. “I’ll accept your excuse on this occasion, Mr Graham, but I don’t want to see it happen again.”

“Sir.”

“To be fair it’s not as if his presence would have made any difference to proceedings,” says Price, “and he wouldn’t have discovered anything he didn’t already know.” He sighs heavily. “The whole affair was extremely distressing and disheartening Mr Graham; I actually quite envy you your absence.”

“It was certainly both of those things,” agrees Jack. He gives a sigh of his own and runs his hand over his face. “And it seems to feel worse each time I hear that damned verdict returned.”

“Wilful murder against person unknown,” repeats Will mechanically.

“Quite,” says Jack, and there’s an unhappy silence as if the impact of the word is resonating; a simple, two-syllable summation of everyone’s frustrated fear. *Unknown*.

*****

Sometime later Will leaves the coroner’s court and opts to return home rather than to Scotland Yard. Despite his marathon sleeping session he doesn’t feel particularly rested, and the idea of lying down for another hour or so is extremely appealing. In this respect however – and more far troubling than the tiredness – is the hazy, pounding feeling that’s prickling around his skull, clotted and curdled as if his head is stuffed with mortar and waterlogged wool. As if to confirm this he finds himself stumbling down the final few steps and so takes a moment to pause next to the statue in the courtyard: an august marble figure resplendent in the military garb of the last century, but whose gravely frowning face and imperious stance are somewhat undermined by the fact he’s spattered from head to toe with pigeon droppings. *Typical*, thinks Will gloomily, *life shits on you while you’re alive and the birds shit on you when you’re dead*. Then he sighs loudly, trying desperately not to think too hard about how unwell he feels. Because as wretched as the realisation is, there’s no denying that the light-headed sensation, coupled with the headaches and the sleepwalking, are horribly reminiscent of his previous illness; and the idea he could be destined for a relapse (and all it could entail) is completely terrifying. Miserably he casts his mind back to this morning. He was still wearing his clothes when he woke up. The bedroom door was unlocked. Is it really conceivable that he might have left the room, left the house even…just like last time. *Surely not though?* thinks Will frantically. *Not so soon, not for no reason…surely it wouldn’t be possible*? It’s probably just nervous strain; that headache the other day was a sure sign. Doubtless a bit of rest will be enough to take the edge off. Yes, it’s fine, that’s all that’s needed: ample sleep, proper food, avoidance of excessive mental excitement…all those stodgy, solid, dependable things which the doctors recommended before (and all presented as so worthy and wholesome that they ended up seeming positively unpleasant).

“Excuse me sir,” says a male voice. “Are you all right?”

Will glances up, blinking in confusion, and is confronted with the whiskery usher from the coroner’s court who’s peering up at him in an anxious way. “Are you all right sir?” he repeats when Will doesn’t respond. “You’ve been stood here for nearly 20 minutes. I thought you might have had some kind of….” he trails off awkwardly and Will feels a cold chill of fear (losing time? *Again?*) that he immediately tries to supress.

“Thank you, I’m fine,” he replies, in what he hopes is a convincing voice. “Just…just deep in thought.”

“Oh, I *see*,” says the usher, obviously reassured now he has an explanation he can understand. In this respect he has an earnest, studious look about him; easy to imagine him poring over dusty volumes in the law library, likewise so lost in thought that minutes run into hours without being any the wiser. “Well in that case I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

“Not at all,” says Will. With considerable effort he manages to muster a smile. “I appreciate your concern.”

The usher smiles back, nods, and departs; and Will scrubs his hands across his face, struggling to remain calm and not give in to the surge of panicky dread that maybe…just maybe…he really is going to be ill again. *No, you’re fine*, he mutters under his breath, *you’re going to be fine*. And he likes the way it sounds so says it again, reciting it over and over like it’s a mantra, an article of faith: as if by repeating it enough times he can conjure it into reality. Magical thinking. *I’m fine, I’m fine, everything’s fine*. At any rate there’s nothing to be gained from standing by the steps of the courthouse, and he’s just contemplating the best route to get himself home when another voice abruptly calls out. Unlike the kindly rumbling tones of the usher, this one has a harsh, strident quality – not entirely unlike the grinding of engine gears – and at the sound of it a nearby flock of pigeons take off, fluttering in shrill foolish alarm.

“Inspector Graham! Mr Graham! Will! Will Graham! It’s you isn’t it? Do you have a moment?”

Will reluctantly turns round and promptly sees a thin, foxy-looking man bearing down on him: a leering, roiling figure, scuttling and skittering as an insect, with smears of ink on its fingers and a shock of red hair bristling out from beneath a soiled, stiff-crowned hat. “Mr Freddy Lounds,” says the apparition proudly, proffering an inky hand which Will pretends not to notice. “Chief correspondent for *The Tattle Crime*.”

Will stares back in stony silence and Freddy raises his eyebrows, miming incomprehension. “Surely you’ve *heard* of us?”

“Yes,” says Will stiffly, “and I’m sorry but I’m not prepared to speak with the press.”

“Oh?” Freddy stretches the single syllable out into an approximation of a groan, as if the word is being tortured on the rack. “Not prepared to speak with the *press*? Rather obstructive don’t you think Mr Graham, withholding information like that? Very disobliging. This is a matter of national interest: the public has a right to know. And inquests *are* a matter of public record.”

“Then you should have attended yourself,” snaps Will, reluctant to admit that he wasn’t there either.

“But I’m asking *you* Mr Graham. As a representative of Scotland Yard. Not to mention your impressions as a *foreigner*.” Freddy takes a step closer and narrows his eyes, which are pale

and practically lashless with a faint pinkish tinge. “Have you been in touch with the Baltimore force since they sent you packing?”

Will feels the first faint stirrings of unease, but with an enormous application of effort manages not to show it. “I really don’t have anything to say to you,” he replies sharply. “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He spins round and begins to walk off but to his dismay Freddy promptly follows, buzzing and hovering like a hornet. “You might want to reconsider that Mr Graham,” he’s now saying. “Who knows, perhaps one day you might be glad to have a sympathetic voice in the press? You might be very *grateful*. Why don’t you let me buy you a drink?” A spindly, ink-stained hand clamps down on his elbow, and Will irritably swats it away. “Now don’t be like that Mr Graham. Even the Ripper has a direct line to the newspapers. Don’t you want one too? My Boss would be so pleased to fix you up.”

Will abruptly stops, frowning at the association of the words (*Dear Boss, I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they won’t fix me just yet…*) and Freddy Lounds stares back, a weird little smile flickering around the edges of his lips as if daring Will to voice the suspicion.

“As far as the so-called ‘direct line’ goes,” Will finally says, “I know perfectly well that the letter was a hoax – almost certainly courtesy of a journalist.” Freddy’s smile grows fractionally wider. “And no, I don’t want one myself. And even if I did, you are without a doubt the *last* person I’d ask to arrange it.”

“Mr Graham,” says Freddy in a tone that’s dripping with false civility, “has anyone ever told you that you are almost *unfeasibly* rude?”

“Yes,” replies Will unhelpfully.

“And arrogant?”

“That too. Although I’m always open to hearing it one more time. They do say the more the merrier.”

“Well then,” says Freddy in the same scrupulously polite voice. “May I be frank with you Mr Graham?”

“If you would, Mr Lounds.”

“The thing is, I really don’t like people – people like you, Will – who don’t respect the freedom of the press. The integrity of journalism, the Fourth Estate of the Realm. Do you know what Burke said about the press? ‘*There were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all.*”

“And it really matters to you to feel important, doesn’t it?” says Will contemptuously. “How long did it take you to learn that quote off by heart?”

“Oh Mr *Graham*,” replies Freddy languorously. “You seem to think you’re something quite special. That you’re…*untouchable*.” To demonstrate the point he lightly cuffs Will across the forearm. “I suspected as much, and I would have been very happy to be proved wrong. You can’t imagine how *delighted* I would have been to be wrong.” Will raises his eyebrows: from the sneering grimace on Freddy’s face, it’s not hard to intuit that the exact opposite would have in fact been the case. “As it is, meeting you in person has just removed any scruples I might have had about telling people the *truth* about you.”

“Which is what, exactly?” snaps Will, his fragile patience finally breaking completely. “So far I haven’t actually heard you accuse me of being anything worse than rude and arrogant, and I’m afraid I was aware of that already.”

“Oh, all in good time,” says Freddy with a truly sinister leer. “No sense in rushing it, is there? I’ve always found the long-game to be the most satisfying.”

“Then you’ll have to play your game on your own.”

“But why would I want to do that?” replies Freddy, “When it’s so much more fun with two?” A spidery hand darts out and gives Will an insolent tap on the cheek. “The thing is Will, what you should know is that I’ve never yet met a person who I couldn’t get the better of. Do you see what I’m saying; do you understand? Even people like you – the special people, the untouchables. You all look down on me and think you’re so much better than I am, but you all get overpowered in the end. A bit of digging, a bit of license, a dose of determination and another scalp gets added to *The Tattle Crime* collection.” He draws back and smiles again. “My Editor likes the look of your scalp Will. It’s so talented. So photogenic. He’ll make sure it gets displayed in pride of place.”

As Will stares back, shocked into numb revulsion in spite of himself, Freddy makes a scornful performance of removing his hat and doffing it before spinning it round and replacing it over the vivid red hair. “You’re all touchable in the end,” he adds softly. “All of you.”

“Go to hell,” snaps Will.

“Then I’ll see you there,” comes the mocking reply, and he’s walking away Will’s horribly aware of the grating voice ringing in his ears: “*You’ll be hearing from me Mr Graham*.”

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Harley Street is as quiet and cloistered as ever when Will arrives, and he strides up the length of it in a purposeful way; looking neither left nor right and refusing to catch anyone’s eye. It makes for a convincing display, although in reality such determination is at complete variance to his internal state because he’s still not *entirely* sure what it is that compelled him to come here – even though there’s no doubt that the choice was a clearly-made and conscious one. It’s not that he’s particularly seeking comfort or reassurance (which he’s too proud to ask for, despite being in need of both) and it isn’t to unburden the day’s events into a listening ear (which he isn’t in the right humour to discuss, even if Hannibal’s ear had presented itself as an especially sympathetic and nurturing one…which it hasn’t). Perhaps, thinks Will as he pulls the bell, it’s merely that he doesn’t have anywhere else to go.

Although that's not entirely true either, because he has a home to go to. Or Scotland Yard. Or even a tavern…and then the door opens and Mary is greeting him and showing him in; and there's a certain relief in diverting his attention so that he doesn't have to question himself about it anymore.

Hannibal, as usual, is in his consulting room – basking in front of the fire like a large jungle cat and staring very intensely into a leather bound book – and Will realises he's starting to find something vaguely unsettling about the way the latter is always coiled, poised and unwavering, within the confines of the same chair. It's almost as if he's lying in wait for something…and fragments of an old nursery rhyme, unbidden, begin to run through Will's mind: *come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly*.

"Good afternoon Will," says Hannibal without glancing up from the book.

Will falters, halfway through the act of removing his coat. "What?" he says in confusion. "How did you know it was me?"

Hannibal smiles into his book before finally putting it to one side and fixing Will with a leisurely stare. "I could smell you, of course," he says. "You are incredibly distinct." Will's mouth promptly falls open in overwhelming dismay at the idea that (holy fuck!) he must obviously smell *ungodly* – and why has no one told him before? – upon which Hannibal looks rather amused and adds: "I should also say that my olfactory capacities are unusually heightened and I find it easy to distinguish individuals on the basis of it." Will still looks unconvinced. "And that you do not smell objectionable in any way. Quite the contrary."

"Oh," says Will (which strikes him as a singularly inadequate response; but, really…how the hell else can he possibly reply to *that*?). "You can identify people on how they *smell*?"

"I can."

"Oh," repeats Will (once more for the road). "That's rather…weird."

"Is that one of your American expressions? Here we would use 'weird' in the context of the mysterious or supernatural, and I can assure you that there is nothing remotely other-worldly about my sense of smell."

"I'd have to disagree, to be honest," says Will. "I certainly don't know anyone else who could do it." He heads towards the other chair then changes his mind at the last minute and props himself against the table instead with his hands in his pockets. "Oh God, today's been complete shi…completely shocking."

"What has happened?"

"Nothing really…Everything. I don't know."

"Something obviously has," says Hannibal serenely, before adding: "How very pale you are." This is uttered with tones of condolence that are almost *extravagant* – as if Will had staggered in clutching numerous mortal gunshot wounds as opposed to being rather wan and low spirited – and it's impossible to tell whether it's genuine concern, or a simulacrum of it,

or whether Hannibal is merely amusing himself with some kind of private joke that's unrelated to whether Will is pale or not. Will ultimately decides it's too much effort to try and work it out and just frowns instead, running his hands through his hair and absent-mindedly tracing a pattern on the rug with his foot.

"Will?" says Hannibal calmly. "What is the matter?"

There's another pause as Will oscillates between repeating another variation of nothing/everything before finally settling on something more tangible. "That medicine you gave me," he finally says.

"Yes?"

"Are you sure it doesn't have any side effects?"

Hannibal stretches his hands in front of him in a leisurely way then folds them together with a complacent glance as if admiring how finely-shaped they are. "Why do you ask?" he says.

"It knocked me out last night. I mean it *completely* knocked me out. And…and I think it might have caused me to sleepwalk." Hannibal's eyebrows shoot skyward, but suddenly Will finds he can't bring himself to talk about the lost time – that shocking sense of stepping sideways out of his own body – as if naming it is going to make it real. "It seems a bit of a coincidence," he says instead. "Too much of one."

"And you believe the medicine I gave you is causing it?"

"Well…yes. Possibly. I mean, I wasn't experiencing anything like that before." Or at least not *immediately* before.

"That is highly unlikely," replies Hannibal smoothly and Will's fledging hope of an explanation promptly plummets and sinks. "My opinion – my *medical* opinion – is that these episodes are not caused by the prescription itself as opposed to the acute cephalgic pain which led me to recommend it in the first place." This is announced in an extremely composed and mannerly way, and Will immediately feels guilty for being so paranoid and accusatory; the fact that he's practically accusing Hannibal of *drugging* him.

"I see," he says unhappily.

"Of course you are at complete liberty to stop taking it if you are concerned, although I would strongly advise against such an action. Your nervous system is overwrought and a sedative would be extremely beneficial. Of the *non-addictive* type," Hannibal adds pointedly; which makes Will think of the laudanum and feel guilty all over again.

"Yes, that's true," he replies, in a rather miserable, defeated voice. And then: "I suppose there'd be no harm in trying it for a bit longer."

"No doubt an improvement will soon present itself," says Hannibal airily.

"I hope so." Will runs his hand over his face again, fighting off a surge of depression and suddenly anxious to change the subject but unable to think of anything to say. Instead he casts

a covert glance at Hannibal from under his eyelashes, privately marvelling at how incredibly elegant and well-dressed the latter always appears to be: impeccably starched shirts with crisp high-stand collars, silk ascot neckties, meticulously embroidered waistcoats, even a gold watch strung neatly across his chest on a chain…it would drive Will insane with irritated discomfort, although Hannibal doesn't seem to mind. All those stiff layers of fabric must feel confining though, surely. Perhaps that's why he's so persistently still? "Why are you always in that chair?" Will says abruptly; then promptly wishes he'd stuck with his initial strategy of saying nothing…because really, silence would have been preferable to what he actually said; which is to effectively imply that Hannibal lives on a piece of furniture.

Fortunately the latter appears to agree that this query doesn't deserve to be dignified with a response (as opposed to be allowed to slink off and die quietly) because instead he waves his hand in Will's direction and asks: "How has your head been since I last saw you?"

Will hopes this is a reference to headaches as opposed to general mental faculties, although given that within the space of five minutes he's accused Hannibal of drugging him (while subsisting in a chair) he supposes he couldn't complain if the latter turns out to be the case. "Still rather painful," he says dolefully.

"How painful? On a scale of one to ten?"

"It's better than before. I don't know. Maybe a five."

"That still seems rather excessive."

"It's not ideal, certainly."

"Indeed not."

"No."

"No," confirms Hannibal, rolling out the 'o' sound in a rather languorous way. And then: "Would you like me to massage it for you again?"

Will glances up sharply at this, opens his mouth, closes it again, and then falters; mostly because he *does* want it, but is uncomfortably aware that the wanting isn't entirely for analgesic purposes as opposed to simply needing…something else. What though? Comfort, perhaps – although it seems a rather inappropriate way of getting it. *I just want to feel better*, thinks Will, a bit wretchedly; and then frowns internally at how whining and clichéd such a plea sounds. He can't help it though, it's true. He feels clichéd and overused, and even then his motives don't entirely make sense to him. He leans further back against the table, trying to formulate a suitable response.

"It is no trouble," says Hannibal in a casual tone.

"I…"

"If you can bear to sit on the floor for a while then I will endeavour to work on your spine as well; I suspect you store a substantial amount of tension in your back and shoulders."

Will hesitates a bit more, tugging at a loose piece of thread on his shirt cuff, and then before he can talk himself out of it launches himself away from the table and across the room so he can deposit himself in front of Hannibal's chair in a somewhat crumpled heap.

"Remove your jacket, if you would," says Hannibal. "I wish to assess your muscle tone." Will hesitates again and then does so; quivering slightly as he feels two warm, firm hands slide slowly across the thin material of his shirt. Hannibal, in turn, moves his palms upwards onto Will's neck, reflecting on how fragile it is – so easy to snap; terrifyingly so – and then strokes protectively across the base, counting the separate vertebrae before saying "Excuse me one moment," and deftly reaching round to flick open Will's top button so he can tug the collar down and run his thumbs over the delicate skin hidden underneath. Will closes his eyes and leans into the touch and Hannibal trails a single finger along the side of his throat in appreciation. "I'm afraid this is going to hurt," he says tenderly. "Ah, yes, it is exactly as I supposed – substantial contraction. If you could learn to relax a little you would undoubtedly see an improvement in the headaches. Not to mention your ability to sleep."

Will makes a non-committal grunting noise in lieu of a response; mostly because he's received similar advice on numerous past occasions and always finds it incredibly irritating – as if relaxation is simply there for the taking, and he's being perverse in not availing himself of it.

"Of course that is easier said than done," amends Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts.

"My life isn't conducive to relaxation," announces Will; then promptly cringes at how theatrical he sounds. It's true though – it doesn't.

"I know. I think we established that very thoroughly in our last conversation."

"Y-e-s," says Will cautiously.

"And so – how is the investigation proceeding?"

"It isn't."

"No?"

"Not really. There's still so little to go on." Oh God his head really is hurting now, throbbing and flaring as several upsetting images from the past few days defiantly troop through it: the desecration of Charlotte Tate, Dr Chilton's carefully controlled venom, the leering Freddy Lounds, even that pale young man from Baltimore whose presence by Scotland Yard remains unaccounted for. He screws his eyes closed to try and banish them, inadvertently allowing his neck to droop to the side until his head is nearly touching Hannibal's knee and he has to remember to jolt it upwards on time.

"You may rest against me if you wish," says Hannibal, "I don't mind." His fingertips dip slightly beneath Will's collar again before returning to the tense, snarled muscles in his shoulders. "Is there anything particular you would like to ask me about? I am a consultant now after all."

“It’s a shame you’re not an official consultant. Then we might be able to get rid of the other one…preferably beneath the wheels of an obliging omnibus. Or in a sack at the bottom of the Thames.” Will smiles cheerfully at the idea of it. “Or via the top window of Scotland Yard.”

“How very unfriendly of you,” says Hannibal with a smirk.

“Not really – I’d make sure I waved goodbye to him on the way down.”

“And who is this consultant?”

“Frederick Chilton.”

“Oh *yes*, the honorary City Police Surgeon. I am very aware of him.”

“And?”

“And he is a colossal idiot,” says Hannibal smoothly.

Will gives a snort of laughter then tips his head back slightly, and Hannibal briefly pauses from massaging his neck to smooth Will’s hair out of his eyes. “He thinks the killer must be left-handed. It doesn’t matter that all the medical evidence indicates the opposite – he’s got some stupid theory about left-handedness and moral development.”

“How…quaint.”

“It’s medieval. I told him so.”

“Did you? How very gratified he must have been.”

“Well it is.”

“Certainly it is. The premise has antiquated theological origins; that the right hand of God is the preferential hand, whereas the left is the hand of judgement. Which is a ludicrous notion in and of itself.”

“Yes.”

“No wonder Dr Chilton is so enamoured of it.”

“I said that we might as well throw the suspect in the Thames and have a witch ducking.”

“That’s my good boy,” says Hannibal sardonically.

“Don’t call me a boy,” comes Will’s voice, muffled from where his face is pressed against Hannibal’s leg.

“Oh yes. I stand corrected.”

“I’m not boyish. I’m manly. *Mannish*. Look, I’ve got a beard and everything.”

“A boyish beard.”

“Oh God,” says Will, “did you just insult my beard?”

“It would appear so; I hope both you and it will accept my apologies. Although seeing as the two of you are putting all the resources you possess into its cultivation, it is rather ironic that you insist on using that unfortunate shaving lotion. The two of you should confer between yourselves and find a less offensive alternative.”

“Yes, well…now you’ve offended us both.”

“Have I? Then perhaps I should desist. I am outnumbered two to one after all.”

“That would probably be wise,” says Will; then promptly jumps when someone knocks loudly on the study door. He’s expecting Hannibal to tell them to go away and can feel his mouth fall open in abject horror when instead the latter calls “Come in” and Mary’s trim little form appears. She performs her usual curtsey and Will is horribly aware of all the blood draining out of his face before flooding back again with full force – no doubt shifting his complexion through a visually interesting spectrum of Corpse White to Communist Red in the process.

“Yes Mary?” says Hannibal, without letting go of Will’s shoulders. “What is it?” The latter discreetly clears her throat, and in the resulting pause Will wonders, rather desperately, whether it’s actually possible to *die* of mortification.

“I’m sorry to disturb you sir,” she replies in a dutiful voice. “And you sir,” she adds to Will (who rapidly amends ‘death: unspecified’ to ‘death: via spontaneous human combustion’), “but Mr Froideveaux is here to see you.”

“Early *again*,” replies Hannibal. “He does time his neuroses at the most inconvenient possible moments. Please tell him to wait.”

Mary performs her usual farewell procedure (nod-smile-curtsey) before withdrawing and Will makes a small groaning noise as she closes the door behind her with a restrained little click. “Oh *God*,” he says faintly.

“What?”

“That was…it was *embarrassing*.”

“It was not. We are hardly doing anything of which there is a need to be ashamed.” Hannibal briefly tightens his grip on Will before letting him go and gently pushing him forward so he himself can stand up. Will scrambles upright too and runs a hand through his hair, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “You really must learn to be less concerned with how people perceive you,” Hannibal adds.

“I’m not,” says Will indignantly. “At least not most of the time. But that *was* embarrassing.” He’s about to say ‘and you would have been too, in my position’ (the position being literally on the floor) but ultimately doesn’t bother because it’s so hard to imagine Hannibal being embarrassed by anything. “Generally I *don’t* care what people think of me,” he says instead.

“No, that is true. At least the basic disposition is certainly there – the raw materials, one might say.”

“Raw materials for what?” asks Will irritably. “What are you talking about?”

Up until this point Hannibal has been heading towards his desk, but at the sound of Will’s voice he abruptly stops, turns, and comes back again. There’s something about the swiftness of the motion – poised and graceful, yet somehow coldly mechanical in its efficacy – that Will finds vaguely menacing; but he forces himself to maintain eye contact regardless and adds, rather defiantly: “You always speak in riddles. Why can’t you just occasionally say what you mean?”

Hannibal is now stood directly in front of Will, and although the height difference isn’t that substantial the force of his presence still manages to makes him appear as if he’s looming far overhead. “Very well,” he says after a pause. “You wish to know my genuine opinion? Plain and unadorned?”

Now Will is starting to think that he probably doesn’t, but it seems a bit late to back out now. “Yes,” he says with a bold sincerity that’s almost entirely manufactured. “Yes, I do.” Oh God, Hannibal’s so much in his space. He tries to take a step backwards, only to realise when his foot hits the ladder to the entresol level of books that there isn’t actually anywhere to go, and then swallows audibly as he tries to quell the sudden surge of…could it actually be *panic*? Hannibal, undeterred, takes a step forward too until they’re as close, possibly even closer, than they were previously; and to Will it feels like they’re breathing one another’s air, sliding into one another’s orbit – headed for impact, the cosmic collision course – as he braces himself for the fact he’s going to hear something hurtful (possibly even *devastating*) in the manner which has happened so often before: *you’re disturbed, you’re disturbing*, *you need help, you need to leave, I need you to get away from me.*

Hannibal doesn’t speak immediately, merely runs his eyes over Will’s face as if inventorying it, and the silence begins to stretch out in a way that’s almost agonizing. “What I *mean*,” he says, “simply put – as requested – is that you possess the right kind of temperament to disregard the conventional and mundane; and in doing so, become a great version of yourself, rather than a mediocre version of what other people wish you to be. True freedom of thought, Will, does not have its basis in *what* one thinks but rather in *how* one thinks it.” He raises his right hand, slow and leisurely, then places a single finger beneath Will’s chin; gently tilting his face upwards as if to scrutinise him more effectively. Will, in turn, takes a sharp intake of breath and presses up against the ladder; aware that Hannibal’s gaze has flickered down to his mouth and feeling his own lips parting very slightly without fully understanding why.

“You asked me before whether I thought I had the measure of you?” continues Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice, so soft and low it could almost be a purr. “Well, let me tell you now. I could immediately deduce that you have considerable reserves of intelligence and imagination and that you are discerning, sensitive, thoughtful and strong-willed. In addition I could detect an intriguing range of contradictions: bold yet timid, impulsive yet cautious, a taste for action blended with a propensity for introspection. Not particularly impressive on my part, one might say – they are, after all, the usual capacities that anyone else might readily perceive. However, when I look at you I also see something else.”

Will's breath hitches again. The intensity of the encounter is deeply unnerving him but he can't quite bring himself to make it stop; can't move away…isn't even sure if he wants to. "What?" he says in a slightly strained voice. "What do you think you can see?"

Hannibal stares back, unblinking. "That you also have a rather impressive capacity for darkness."

Will can feel his eyes widen in shock, his entire focus constricting and shrinking to the black soulless eyes staring into his; the low, hypnotic voice; and the sensation of warm breath that's now so close it's skimming against his eyelashes. The situation is becoming unfeasible now; delirious and overwhelming. Surely it shouldn't be possible to feel so vulnerable yet so empowered, so right and so wrong – such a cold sense of dread with such a molten sense of yearning – all clamouring together, all for one and one for all, together at once and at the same time? He pushes helplessly against the ladder again, unintentionally arching his back towards Hannibal as he does so, and then gasps out loud when he stumbles slightly and promptly feels both the latter's hands curl round his hips.

"Be careful," says Hannibal softly. "You are getting close to losing your balance. Pitching over. I know," he adds just as Will's opening his mouth to try and respond. "It's so much to bear isn't it? So hard to remain upright. All the darkness. The dread and the doubt. And yet in spite of it all, Will Graham, there remains a particular kind of beauty about you which is both artful and lethal. This work that you do so well; the way in which you do it. The nature of who and what you are. Something small, solitary and striving yet with such potential for greatness. A little wild thing." Hannibal removes one hand from Will's hipbone and uses a single finger to skim along the side of his jaw, then back down his throat. "*Angelo Della Morte* with innovation, and inspiration, and a slim, dark soul."

Will shakes his head, almost frantically, confused as much by the unintelligible foreign words as the impenetrable English ones. "I don't…"

"You don't understand? Naturally you don't. But you shall." Hannibal abruptly lets Will go and then takes a step back. "No doubt you think I have reverted to enigmas and riddles again; but I can assure you that the truth of what I am saying is as plain and prosaic as could be devised. The only thing lacking is that you don't yet have the right perspective to appreciate it. But your ability to assume another's perspective being what it is…" he pauses, allowing the implication to hover in the air like smoke, before moving away entirely and straightening the lapels on his jacket. "I am afraid I shall have to leave you now," he adds casually, as if the past two minutes didn't happen. "But please do come back if there are aspects of the investigation you wish to discuss."

There's a pause, and then: "Yes," says Will hazily; not because he can really focus on the statement, but simply because he has the sense that this is some sort of performance in which he has to take the right cues. He takes his glasses off and rubs his hand over his eyes, feeling as if he's starting to grow slightly unhinged. A part of him wants to grab Hannibal by his pristine shirtfront and give him a good shake while demanding 'what the fuck was *that*?'… but in the same jarring way as before the spell has now been broken and they're no longer dwelling in that twisted, outlawed wonderland that seems to soar up between them; blazing away on the horizon, way beyond what passes for the real world. If that's even what it is…

Will isn't sure; he doesn't have the words for it. And yet a guilty sense of wishing to recapture it has a fervour and urgency that's overpowering. With a monumental effort he pulls himself together before straightening his own clothes and allowing Hannibal to steer him towards the door, one hand resting on his shoulder. The touch is gentle enough, but Will has an abrupt sense that when he gets home tonight he'll see a mark there, a scarlet brand signifying….what?

Hannibal opens the door and Will catches a glimpse of a man sitting in the corridor, sleek and rotund with a glossy pampered-looking beard and primly clutching his gloves and hat while bristling with fretful self-importance. He meets Will's eye and shoots him a look of dislike, so Will frowns back and then turns to Hannibal, aware that he wants to say something but unsure of exactly what. For a few seconds they stare at each other then Hannibal raises his hand and swiftly – so swiftly Will isn't entirely sure if it's even happened – brushes his fingers along Will's cheek.

"Soon," says Hannibal in a low, soft tone; and Will nods numbly before Hannibal raises his voice and adds: "I shall see you in 10 minutes Mr Froideveaux – at the appointed time." And then just like that everything has shifted again; and Hannibal has vanished into his room and closed the door while Will is standing in the corridor like someone awoken from a deep sleep.

"What the fucking shit?" mutters Will under his breath; which as a statement is hardly designed to shed light on the situation but at least helps him relieve his feelings to some degree; so he does it again, and then again, taking it in turn to emphasise each word. Then he turns round slowly, and is surprised to see that Mr Froideveaux is still staring at him with what is now approximating outright animosity. In fact there's something about his whole demeanour – from the beady little eyes, to the fussily groomed beard, to the way his feet are shuffling back and forward across the parquet floor (click-click-click) – that strikes Will as almost unbearably irritating.

"Are you a *patient* of Dr Lecter's?" demands the latter, apropos of nothing.

"No," says Will.

"No? Not a patient?"

"No." Will frowns now, confused by the possessive tone of the query. Can it be that this odd little man is…*envious* in some way? Hmm; yes, that's definitely it: Mr Froideveaux is aggrieved that someone who is not himself has been sequestered behind closed doors with his Most Beloved Object. Will idly wonders what sort of response he'd get if he confided that he'd just spent the last 10 minutes sat on the floor in his shirt sleeves receiving a massage from the adored hands themselves; as a thought experiment it's quite an interesting query and could go either way: either levels of jealously that are positively Shakespearian, or depths of grief that are absolutely Epic.

Mr Froideveaux is still staring; even more intensely, if possible, than before. *Oh God*, thinks Will, *I know: he's recognised the coat*. No doubt he's about to be accused of stealing it. Although to be honest he'd probably rather be indicted for theft (which at least had a rakish air of daring about it) than concede the coat was donated as a goodwill gesture (which just

sounds deeply pitiful). Not that either explanation would probably be very well received, given that Mr Froideveaux is clearly insanely proprietary where Hannibal is concerned… perhaps Will's going to be forced into some kind of unedifying Beard Off in the corridor while the latter tries to reclaim the coat on behalf of its original and rightful Glorious Owner?

"*I* know…" says Mr Froideveaux suddenly, and Will's patience is expiring to the point he's ready to snap, 'yeah, you're goddamn right I stole it – and the scarf as well; what are you going to do about it, you self-righteous shit?' when the latter pre-empts him entirely by announcing "you're that American detective, aren't you?"

Will briefly considers denying it, but Mr Froideveaux is obviously sufficiently convinced to sally forth without waiting for a confirmation. "I recognise you from the papers!" he says gleefully. "I thought you were involved in the Ripper case but you're here about that other murder aren't you? It's a *business* call."

"I'm sorry," says Will, in a tone that clearly indicates he's not sorry at all. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The *murder*," says Mr Froideveaux.

"*What* murder?"

"At the Fitzroy Hotel." Mr Froideveaux is enjoying himself now, obviously relishing his newfound role as the bearer of bad news. "You must know it? It's just down the road." And Will stares back numbly, as one by one every single hair on the back of his neck stands on end; stares at the little red mouth opening and closing like a ventriloquist's dummy, suddenly knowing with a miserable surge of fear *exactly* what it's going to say.

"Their ostler was killed last night. Oh my word, it was *gruesome*. He'd been…"

And there it is. Will's entire body goes completely cold and rigid before he replies, in a sharp mechanical voice: "I don't know anything about that." *I don't…do I*? *No*, *I don't I don't I don't*. He can feel beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead, tingling and prickling in a horrible abrasive way.

"I say, are you all right?" says Mr Froideveaux in a kinder tone. "You've gone awfully pale. Shall I get Dr Lecter? I know you're not his patient, but I'm sure if *I* asked him…"

"No!" says Will. Mr Froideveaux draws back slightly, and Will clears his throat, struggling to calm down. "Thank you," he adds, "but I'm fine. Really. I have to be going. Now. I have to go now. It was, um, nice to meet you."

"Well, likewise I'm sure. A pleasure; although I don't suppose we'll be meeting again will we? Seeing as you're not actually Dr Lecter's *patient*…"

Will ignores him and blindly stumbles his way to the door, practically diving through it and then dashing down the length of Harley Street so he can turn the corner and slump against the wall. His heart is pounding in his ears, a sickening heady staccato of dread and doubt and something not entirely removed from despair. *No, it's fine*, he mutters to himself. *It is; it has*

to be. *This only started 24 hours ago. It's nothing like before. Nothing. You haven't lost control in the same way, you're not ill like you were then. It wouldn't be possible for it to happen so quickly. It's fine. You're fine.*

"I *am*," says Will softly. "I'm fine." He drags his hand across his face and takes a few deep breaths, struggling wildly to pull himself together. Oh God…unbearable to have some kind of panicky breakdown in the middle of the street: in fact not just unbearable; untenable. He won't let it happen. *See*, he thinks, *you are in control*. He scans round the environment in an attempt to steady and ground himself, paying an exaggerated attention to all the minor details: the shade of red on the pillar box; the straggling stalks in the basket of a flower seller trudging towards Cavendish Square; the brass facings of a passing hackney carriage. Then across the road he catches sight of a pasteboard sign advertising a local charitable campaign: "What have you done for your Union parish fund?" But the illustration in the centre of a cluster of beseeching orphans breaks up the text and all he can focus on is: *what have you done*.

"*Nothing*," says Will. Oh God, he's said it out loud. The flower seller, scenting a potential customer, has been heading towards him but on hearing it shoots him a wary look and passes on. *But I haven't*, he wants to call after her. It's just an awful coincidence. It has to be; an extreme coincidence admittedly, but still by far the most plausible explanation. *I haven't done anything*, Will repeats, a little more firmly this time. *I might have done once, but it wasn't my fault – and things are different now*.

And that much, at least, is true. Things *are* different now. Now he's not alone, not like he was back in Baltimore; now he's got an ally. A source of ballast, but also a means of steerage and direction – a paddle, for want of a better metaphor – and Will smiles very faintly at the idea of what Hannibal might say to hear himself described in such terms. But nevertheless…isn't it still the case? It certainly feels as if it as, or at least as if it *could* be. At least as close to it as Will is likely to get. But any source of support is better than none, and surely it's not possible to navigate *too* far off course with the promise of trust and solidarity behind you?

He won't want to keep helping you if he finds out the truth hisses an unhappy voice at the back of Will's mind, but with effort he forces himself to dismiss it. The sun is beginning to set now and across the street the warden is lighting the gas in the streetlamps as the first thick curls of fog start to descend. It's such a wretched evening…clad in ragged drizzles of rain and tattered swirls of mist in the same way a beggar wears shreds and patches. With a visible effort Will straightens up and pulls away from the wall, then deliberately turns his back on the accusing words of the sign and begins the long, lonely pilgrimage back home.

Chapter End Notes

ETA Thanks to the incredibly talented VergofTowels this chapter now has fabulous fanart, which you can feast your eyes on here :-D

Chapter 8

Will spends the next day in a state of anxious ambivalence, simultaneously reassuring himself that he hasn't done anything wrong whilst waiting in agony for what feels like the inevitable pounding at the door. But the time stretches out, one hour limping after another, and nothing actually happens. The murder of the ostler barely warrants a mention in the papers (the journalists appearing to feel that too much attention is being lavishly heaped upon the Ripper murders to leave any spare for something else) and beyond the confrontation with Mr Froideveaux Will doesn't even hear anyone mention it. There's no knock at the door – no accusing faces, no fingers pointing in his direction – and on the second day he gives himself some tentative permission to relax.

"I told you it was fine," he says to his reflection in the mirror; and the sensation of reassurance is rather an odd one: as if there's a fearful, furtive part of himself that inhabits its own separate space and requires safety and soothing at the hands of a more competent and self-assured aspect. Will isn't even sure which one of these personas he identifies with the most; which one is closest to his 'true' self. In fact if anything they seem to exist in an uneasy state of conflict, manipulating and discouraging one another and taking it in turns to be the one in the mirror on the basis of who happens to be feeling the most exultant that day; and who, in turn, is the most bewildered and demoralized. They skim around in his subconscious like shadows, weightless and incorporeal and so very hard to pin down…whoever it is that looks askance into the mirror and tempts fate and doesn't care – and the one who stares back with the forlorn face and the sad, troubled eyes.

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At the end of the third day, Will retreats into his room with a sheaf of autopsy reports for company and spends several unsettling hours trying to make sense of them. Even with the fire blazing in the grate it's unseasonably cold, so he wraps a blanket round his shoulders and sits cross-legged on the bed with a grisly assortment of documents strewn round him and focusses on preparing a detailed report for Jack on the necessity of widening their search to two separate assailants on the grounds that the first series of murders can't possibly be linked to the second. Ideally he would have liked to discuss this with Hannibal, whom he's not seen since their last fraught encounter, but he's been too anxious and preoccupied to make contact – and now that he's feeling calmer it's still not possible because Hannibal is otherwise engaged tonight with holding some sort of horrifically formal dinner party. Jack Crawford is going to be there, and Will could have been there too (their respective invitations arriving at Scotland Yard together in matching cream envelopes) but the very idea of it is completely appalling. Partly because Will is convinced there's a special circle of hell reserved for that kind of stilted social interaction but also, which is far less easy to admit to, because he enjoys the intimacy of their private communions and doesn't like the idea of having to share Hannibal with other people. Not that 'enjoy' is really the right word for something so fevered and enthralling. Will glances briefly at the invitation, currently propped against the candlestick on his bedside table, and frowns slightly to himself. Then, almost guiltily, he picks it up; running a finger over the thick embossed card and admiring the elegance and distinctiveness of the handwriting. There's a faint aroma of bergamot about it, and Will is

wondering whether he can possibly bear the humiliation of actually lifting it to his face and *smelling* it when a knock at the door saves him from this lunatic impulse, and he hastily stows the card beneath his pillow before calling "Come in!" in a false bright tone of voice which makes him cringe. At which point the door promptly opens and the face of Miss Verger appears, rapidly followed by Miss Verger's body; and then (rather surreally) Miss Verger is in the room in her entirety and is perching neatly on the side of his bed and smiling at him.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she says merrily. "In fact now I'm actually here my nerve is beginning to fail me." She rolls her eyes and Will can't help laughing at the extreme unlikeliness of such a thing. "But I'm afraid Alana is out and I have become terribly bored. And it does seem rather dismal for me to be bored and solitary downstairs while you are being bored and solitary up here, so I've formed a rather madcap scheme for us to combine our resources and see if we can't inspire each other to be lively and sociable."

The idea of being able to inspire anyone into lively sociability (as opposed to depleting them into a state of feeling perennially pissed off) makes Will laugh again, but he still moves aside to make room for Miss Verger and then shuffles the papers out of the way for good measure. She runs her bright fox-brown eyes over the top few pages as he's doing so, and then gives a small sigh.

"I don't envy you that task," she says, much more seriously than before. "And truly, if I'm interrupting you then don't hesitate to tell me."

"No, it's fine. To be honest I'm grateful for the distraction." And then, before she can start feeling sorry for him: "Where has Mrs Bloom gone?"

"A political science lecture at the Islington Institute," she replies; and Will raises his eyebrows, impressed that anyone should choose to spend their free time in such a scholarly and serious-minded way. Miss Verger catches the look and, being quick-witted enough to immediately interpret it, gives another smile. "Of course men take education for granted," she says. "Knowledge is collated by yourselves and for yourselves, whereas we must scrabble to grasp what we can. In fact I would have gone with her, but it was invitation only and Alana is far more adept at inveigling intellectuals than I am. I'm afraid I haven't the patience for it."

"I would have thought you'd be very good at it Miss Verger."

"Oh call me Margot Mr Graham – do. And I shall call you Will."

Will smiles awkwardly, wondering if he *possibly* can, and she smiles back at him in a good-natured way. "It's all right," she says, "you can ease yourself into it first. Perhaps practice in the mirror when you're alone to ensure you look suitably casual and worldly?"

This makes Will laugh, and then Margot laughs too. "Alana is going to be quite envious," she adds, "seeing what a pleasant evening we have had while she, poor thing, has been trapped in a draughty lecture hall with nothing but dull, conventional political science and pompous elderly men for company. Although no doubt they will exchange positions halfway through, and then it will be the political science that is pompous and outdated, and the men who are dull and conventional."

Will smiles and leans back against the headboard, marvelling at how he is starting to feel genuinely relaxed and rather enjoying the novelty of the sensation. There's also the fact that, in his humility, he is a great admirer of beauty in other people; and now that she's so close he can't help appreciating how attractive she is and what a pleasure it is to be able to observe her at such close quarters. "I like how forthright you are," he adds with unusual enthusiasm. "Not enough people say what they really think."

"Thank you Will. And thank you, likewise, for not being offended by me; I hope it goes without saying that my derision isn't entirely in earnest. I don't have some kind of vendetta against men in general."

"Of course not – I never felt that you did. You seem to have a sense of injustice, which is quite a different thing."

"Yes, you're right there. And there is so *much* injustice." She frowns pensively, then gives her head a small shake as if recollecting herself. "Of course in many ways I am extremely fortunate, because I at least have access to money and that makes all the difference in the world. My father was a butcher; an extremely prosperous and successful one. At one point our family supplied half of Smithfield."

Will nods, well aware of Smithfield Market which is famous throughout London as a foremost purveyor of meat and poultry. In fact it's not far from one of the murder scenes and he and Jack have recently walked past it: a chaotic, rain-streaked wreck where the cobbles ran red with the blood of freshly slaughtered pigs and the barrows were stained and smeared in a stomach-churning profusion of fat, foam and gore. He catches Margot's eye and they exchange a slight grimace in silent acknowledgement of accruing wealth from such a source. "I have no particular love for any of my family," she adds, and the pensive look has now returned. "However, contrary to all their fond wishes for me, I am now living a very happy and contented life – and I consider that the best kind of revenge. Not least because it is partly their fortune which has made it possible."

Will smiles at this, aware of a child-like impulse within himself that is hugely reassured at the idea of a happy ending – that happy ending are even possible, at least for some people. To this effect he adds: "Mrs Bloom seems a very fortunate choice of companion."

"Oh, yes! Yes she is. I owe all my happiness to her."

"It's mutual, I'm sure."

"Yes, it's a wonderful thing to find someone who understands and accepts me so completely. She's inspired me to become a better version of myself." She gives another of her bright smiles and Will smiles back; even though his is much more wistful, because as wonderful as such an idea might be for someone else, the thought of attaining it for himself seems cruelly impossible. "And yet now your earlier remarks about injustice must come into play," Margot adds, "because there is no doubt that the odds of finding such contentment have been stacked against us simply because we are women." She nods her head towards the stack of papers on the bed. "Take those poor souls for example; destined to meet a terrible end for no better reason that being born female."

Will glances up sharply, suddenly intrigued. “I was struck by what you said just then,” he says. “You’re the first person who’s emphasised their gender over their profession.” Margot raises her eyebrows. “You think the fact they worked as prostitutes is incidental?”

“Oh, I see what you mean. Well, of course I don’t know for certain; but a hatred of prostitutes – of *vice*,” she tosses her head with impatience at the conservatism of the term, “tends to be the lot of the religious, the sanctimonious and the inflexibly moral; and those are not the type of characters who lean towards ripping women apart in the middle of the street. In fact I think that someone who combines such traits together would be rather a rare specimen. On the other hand, men who merely hate the female sex and take the opportunity to express it by targeting the defenceless and accessible.” She shrugs. “I suspect they are a little easier to come by.”

Will nods slowly at this, frowning at the papers and absent-mindedly biting his thumbnail. He’d wondered the same himself on several occasions, but until now has been wary of expressing a theory that runs so radically counter to the prevailing view. Amongst the CID it’s taken for granted that a hatred of prostitutes is the Ripper’s main motive, and at no point has anyone even broached the possibility that it’s the vulnerability implicit in the profession – rather than its moral character – which is influencing the choice of victims. Which means that the current emphasis on locating and interviewing suspects with known fixations for ‘Social Cleanliness’ is a complete waste of time. Hearing Margot describe it in such a lucid way strengthens his resolve to pursue the idea, and he scribbles down a note to remind himself to ask Hannibal about it later.

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The next day Will goes to Scotland Yard, where he’s highly perturbed to find none other than Mr Froideveaux himself lingering about in the foyer. For a hideous, panicky moment Will thinks he’s there to report his strange reaction to the ostler’s murder before reassuring himself that if this were really the case he’d hardly have waited so long to do it and must be here on an unrelated matter. He tries to sidle past unobserved, but is foiled by Mr Froideveaux noisily dropping several of his parcels and noticing Will as he stoops round to retrieve them.

“Oh hello!” he says, friendly once more now he no longer feels Will is poaching on his territory. “It’s Mr Graham isn’t it? Feeling better today?”

“Yes, much,” says Will awkwardly. “Thank you.”

“Splendid, splendid,” comes the hearty reply. “I don’t suppose you’d be so good as to help me with my shopping would you? Your limbs are a bit younger than mine.” *Nice try, you lazy bastard* thinks Will, although he obligingly crouches down and recovers a large brown paper parcel with ‘Borough Market Fromagerie’ printed on the side. “Thank, thank you,” says Mr Froideveaux when it’s restored to him. “Most kind. I say – do you care for cheese?”

“Do I care for…cheese?” repeats Will a bit uncomprehendingly.

“I’ve discovered a sublime Scottish cheddar, most irresistible. I used to believe that the Potter’s Yard Dairy couldn’t be beaten, but…

“So what are you doing here?” interjects Will, even as he’s desperately trying to think of a way to extricate himself (partly because he doesn’t like being reminded of how he showed his discomposure over the ostler’s death in such a disastrous way; but also because, considering everything else he’s having to deal with, standing in the middle of Scotland Yard being tormented with cheese anecdotes seems a level of suffering too far).

“Mr Froideveaux is with me,” says an unpleasantly familiar voice.

“Oh,” says Will tersely. “Good morning Dr Chilton.”

“Mr Graham…delighted. Come to share more wild speculation I suppose?”

“Not really,” says Will in a bored voice.

“And what’s that you have there?” adds Dr Chilton, gesturing at the book in Will’s coat pocket in a needlessly accusing way.

“What, this? *Middlemarch*.”

“Oh a *novel*,” says Dr Chilton, with the authority of someone who never reads anything except wine lists, self-penned monographs and the occasional newspaper article about himself. “Rather lurid I always find. Insufficient grist to one’s intellectual mill.”

Will decides it’s too much effort to take the trouble to respond to this, so just smiles in a deliberately vacant way while Mr Froideveaux bounces up and down to his left, obviously desperate to claim acquaintance. “I’m a trustee of Dr Chilton’s asylum,” he tells Will with a degree of pride. “I was never particularly interested in such things before, but through my discussions with *Dr Lecter*,” he pauses reverently as if expecting sunbeams to crack through the window at the sound of his words, “I realised what an exciting and important field mental hygiene actually is.”

“Yes Hannibal is unusually knowledgeable in such areas,” says Dr Chilton. He looks briefly triumphant, clearly dropping the name on purpose to demonstrate a degree of familiarity that elevates him above Will and Mr Froideveaux; and even though Will knows he could easily win this social status skirmish himself with assorted disclosures (including, but not limited to, “yeah, well, he pushed *me* up against a ladder and called me a mongoose – suck it up, peasants”) he doesn’t care enough about impressing either of them to bother, so merely responds with: “Yes, Dr Lecter seems very expert in a number of areas.”

“Oh he *is*,” coos Mr Froideveaux, sighing like a lovesick swain; and Will smiles politely and tries to edge away before stumbling very slightly against one of the wicker chairs that are dotted around the foyer to accommodate waiting visitors. Oh fuck – *fuck*. He’d seemed a bit better yesterday; had even begun to tentatively hope the symptoms could be passing off. And of all the worst possible times for a relapse…

As if reading Will’s mind, Dr Chilton’s left eyebrow begins to suggestively elevate up his face. “Not been *drinking* have we Mr Graham?” he asks after a loaded pause.

“No,” snaps Will, even whilst heartily wishing that the explanation could be so straightforward. “I’m prone to headaches. They sometimes affect my coordination.”

“Oh I *see*,” says Dr Chilton condescendingly, in a way that’s clearly intended to imply: ‘I see that you are a shameless bullshitter – and as drunk as a sailor to boot.’

“Well, good to see you both,” says Will abruptly (and insincerely), “but I’m afraid I need to be going.” At the back of his mind is a nagging, unhappy doubt that Mr Froideveaux is going to tell Chilton about the way he behaved at Hannibal’s house…although not that it would matter if he *did*, he amends to himself. There’s nothing to connect him to the ostler after all; no way of linking him to it, even if he had done anything. *Which I haven’t*, mutters Willl under his breath. With an effort he dismisses the thought and walks away (thankfully in a straight line) where he discovers Zeller in the main office: boots on the desk, cup of tea in hand, and enthusiastically chewing on a pen whilst poring over the inquest reports. Given that Will associates the latter so closely with Price, it’s actually rather a shock seeing one without the other: not unlike Nelson’s Column without Nelson at the top of it.

“Oh, hello,” says Zeller, glancing up from his pages. “Any news?”

“What sort of news?” replies Will, peering over Zeller’s shoulder at the mound of paperwork and wincing at the sight of Dr Chilton’s flamboyant signature scrawled across so many pages.

“I don’t really know to be honest,” says Zeller with disarming frankness. “It’s just the sort of enquiry one’s supposed to make. You can ask me if you like – not that I’ve got any either. Everything appears to have ground to a halt again.”

“Yes, it’s incredibly frustrating. And it’s always the same: a flurry of activity after a new death and then – nothing.”

“Nothing,” agrees Zeller gloomily.

“I hate it; the lack of anything proactive to do.”

“But what *can* we do, beyond trying to catch him in the act?” Zeller briefly looks thoughtful, before adding with a completely straight face: “*I* know, we should dress up as women and stage a deceptive operation.”

“Oh yes,” says Will, “that’s an amazing idea. I can just see it now: ‘which would you prefer sir, the prostitute who’s six foot tall or the one with the beard?’ Anyway, knowing our luck we’d just end up getting arrested for soliciting.”

“True. Imagine that.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Mr Crawford would have to come and bail us out,” replies Zeller. “Oh my God, think how furious he’d be…he’d drag us round Scotland Yard by our bodices. Although having said that you never know; he might think it’s a good idea. He might want to dress up as a woman and come with us. Imagine *that*.”

“No,” says Will firmly.

“Jack Crawford in a *bonnet*,” adds Zeller with relish.

“Just – no.”

“No,” agrees Zeller, nodding away.

“Anyway he’d get arrested as well, so who would bail him out?”

“That’s a point…Perhaps the Home Secretary?”

“The *Lord Mayor*.”

“Oh I know, Queen Victoria.”

“What are you two cackling about?” asks Price, who’s just returned brandishing a sheaf of papers that’s even larger than Zeller’s. “You look like you’ve been at the gin.”

“I’m not really sure where to start,” says Zeller. “Which do you want first? Jack Crawford in a bonnet getting bailed by royalty; or Will in a dress in an alleyway, peddling the erotic arts?”

“Well, it’s excessively generous of you to offer me both,” replies Price, “but on reflection I think I’d rather have neither. Although I must clarify Mr Graham – *peddling*?”

“Well, probably more like giving them away.”

“Yes; no offence to you, or your very charming beard, but I fear you wouldn’t fetch the market rate for that kind of thing. Although Mr Crawford would probably have a better idea than me; as we speak he and the Chief Superintendent are arranging interviews at the Society for Civic and Moral Reform. I suspect it’s going to be a bit of wild goose chase myself, but there you go.” He waves his hand around, slightly aimlessly. “It’s a sign of how desperate they are for leads I suppose. But our man is hardly going to be advertising himself, and all they’re going to be confronted with is numerous apoplectic gentlemen spouting about social evil and ‘ladies of the night’…”

“While no doubt hiring them on the side,” interjects Zeller.

“…yes, while no doubt making furtive and hypocritical use of their services – and it will be substantial manpower and excessive paperwork, and by the end of it we’ll be no better off than we were before.”

“Yes,” says Will slowly, thinking back to last night’s conversation with Margot. “And besides that, it’s scarcely feasible that the Ripper is going to turn out to be some sort of misguided moral reformer.” The conversation strengthens his resolve to raise his concerns with Jack; and after going through the pathology notes with Price and pointing out some of Dr Chilton’s more egregious idiocies (“capable of blotting out the *sun,*” says Price), he leaves Scotland Yard and heads off towards Harley Street. The trek across Charing Cross reminds him of the pale young man from last week and sure enough, with one of those eerie synchronicities that occasionally follow such reflections, he actually materialises just as Will is beginning to

brood about it. At which point Will realises that's it almost certainly not a coincidence at all, as opposed to the latter most likely lying in wait by Scotland Yard as the most promising place to locate him.

"Hello again Mr Graham," he says as he falls into step beside Will. "How are you doing? You seem a bit thinner than when I last saw you. Have you been ill?"

"What do you want?" replies Will irritably without slowing down.

"Nothing much Mr Graham. Just to get acquainted."

"You should visit the American Embassy if you need help with something," snaps Will. "Or go to the Commonwealth Social Club in Highgate – lots of American immigrants meet up there." *Or go and jump in the Thames, or under an omnibus, but however you choose to do it just kindly fuck off*.

"But I don't want to meet any Americans," comes the calm reply. "And I don't need help with anything. I just wanted to talk with you."

"Well now you have." Will abruptly grinds to a halt and the young man outpaces him by a few steps and has to come scuttling back. "Look, Mr…"

"Brown. Matthew Brown."

"Look Mr Brown, I'm going to be frank with you, and please don't be offended by this." *Although I really don't care if you are*. "But you seem to want something from me that I can't offer you. I'm not in a position to be your friend."

"What position would that be?" asks Matthew Brown politely.

Will scowls, while privately conceding that this possibly wasn't the best way of phrasing it (what position, after all, is generally considered conducive for friendship? On all fours? Standing on one's head?). "I want you to stop following me," he says firmly.

"I'm not following you Mr Graham. I'm just…running into you."

"Well stop running into me," snaps Will, heartily wishing he could just throw social restraint to the wind and advise Matthew Brown to run off Westminster Pier instead. "I don't want you to try and speak with me again."

"The thing is Mr Graham," replies the latter in an unsettlingly earnest way, as if Will hasn't spoken, "I read all about you when I was in Baltimore. I know about you. And then I read about you in the London papers and having you here in the same city for a second time…it's like fate."

"Hardly."

"Do you believe in fate Mr Graham?"

“No,” says Will in the type of tone that ought to be able to quell a lump of granite and yet which slides off Matthew Brown with no obvious effect. “Not even *slightly*.”

“It doesn’t matter Mr Graham; I do. I think people sometimes come into one another’s orbit for a reason. I think our paths were meant to cross for a reason.”

“Then you keep thinking that,” says Will in a low, intense voice. “But you’ll have to think it by yourself. I’m not going to warn you again.”

“It’s all right Mr Graham. I’m not going to make any trouble, I promise. I don’t want to *harm* you.” He emits a sudden high-pitched chuckling noise as if the very idea is wonderfully funny and Will gives a wince of distaste. “I just want to give you an opportunity to… understand.”

Will, whose patience has now thoroughly expired (and who likewise can’t face asking what it is he’s supposed to understand) makes an executive decision to call time on this unsettling conversation so grinds to a sudden halt and flags down a passing hackney carriage in order to have the satisfaction of seeing Matthew Brown’s thwarted expression as he’s whisked away in it. Once inside he slumps against the back of the seat, frowning to himself and trying to gauge to what extent he should be concerned. Maybe not *too* much, although admittedly this new problem has now been jolted up several priority levels from its previous status. It’s not the first time he’s had to deal with admirers though; in this respect, Matthew Brown is merely one in a succession of intensely earnest, somewhat inadequate individuals, who have read some answering echo of incongruity and strangeness within Will and promptly over-identified with it. None of them have ever caused serious difficulties before and there’s no immediate reason to assume Matthew Brown is about to break the trend. Nevertheless he makes a mental note to ask Jack to keep an eye out for the latter loitering around Scotland Yard; perhaps a formal police caution would be enough of a deterrent. Then he hopes Matthew didn’t overhear him giving directions for Harley Street…although on the basis of how effectively Hannibal was able to deal with the ostler maybe it’s to be hoped that he *did* overhear and is destined to roll up there and be cowed into quivering submission via an imposing stare. In this respect Will’s aware of a pervading sense of awkwardness at the idea of seeing Hannibal after the intensity of their last encounter, but consoles himself that at least he has something concrete to enquire about which should help keep things on a more mundane (and therefore more manageable) level. The now familiar route passes quickly, and Mary doesn’t even bother formally announcing him anymore as opposed to simply welcoming him and telling him to go through to Dr Lecter’s consulting room. Will does so and discovers Hannibal behind his desk, deeply preoccupied with sorting large stacks of leather-bound books from one pile to another.

“Oh – good afternoon,” he says when Will comes in. “Another well-timed visit. A patient has just cancelled their appointment otherwise I should have been unable to see you.”

“Sorry, I should probably call ahead in future,” replies Will whilst gloomily wondering how he’s possibly going to organise such a thing.

“Don’t trouble yourself; it would cost a fortune in messengers. You know you are always welcome to wait if I’m not available.”

“Thank you.”

“Any developments in the investigation?”

“Nothing at all…Unless you count a suggestion for me, my beard and the Police Surgeon’s assistant to disguise ourselves as prostitutes.” Hannibal’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline. “You know what?” says Will, “Forget that. Forget that *entirely*. But no, no new leads or evidence.”

“And how have *you* been since I last saw you? Hunting snakes?”

“Oh God,” says Will. “Subject change, please. Preferably something that doesn’t involve comparing me to large rodents.”

“If you wish. But what should we discuss? Perhaps it would please you to observe that I have taken your advice to heart and exerted myself to get out of my chair.”

“Oh yes – you’re actually moving about for once.”

“Indeed,” says Hannibal in a martyred tone. “See what efforts I will go to in order to keep you happy?”

Will smiles and leans further back against the desk. “So how was your dinner party?”

“*Very* enjoyable,” says Hannibal. “You should have come.” Will promptly ducks his chin and looks slightly embarrassed, and Hannibal uses the resulting silence to take a few moments to appreciate how finely drawn his features are, thrown into flattering relief by the low afternoon light. Really, it’s as if everything curves upwards: the tip of his nose and the tilt of his cheekbones; his eyelashes; his full upper lip, his mouth itself, when smiling – which admittedly isn’t often.

“I’m sorry,” Will finally replies, completely unaware of the lingering observation. “It’s not that I didn’t appreciate the invitation, but…”

“But it is not an environment in which you feel particularly comfortable, which is entirely understandable. Besides you are here now, so I can still endeavour to entertain you. I suppose you have come to tell me what it wrong?”

“How do you know anything’s wrong?”

“How do I know, Will? Because you have told me of course.”

“No I haven’t. I haven’t told you anything.”

“No, and you never tell me if you have trimmed that heroic beard of yours, or acquired a new shirt, or cut your hair; but I observe it nonetheless.”

Will sighs heavily. Having his anxiety so directly alluded to has touched the part of him that desperately wants to confide about the spectre of the murdered ostler; despite the frank

impossibility of such a thing. “I’d like to ask you about the investigation,” he says instead. “I was speaking with my housemate last night and she raised something that no one else has.”

“Yes?”

“The Ripper – his choice of victims. Do you think he targeted them because they were prostitutes? Or is it simply because they were women?”

Hannibal looks faintly surprised. “Well, women *obviously*. Of course there may well be some kind of hatred or fixation with sexuality as well, but there is certainly no misplaced sense of moral outrage underlying these crimes. If seamstresses or nursemaids were obliged to conduct their business in lonely alleyways then we would be reading about them in the papers instead.”

Will nods, turning this over in his head. “He’ll be unmarried won’t he?”

“Almost certainly. Of course he may have female acquaintances, or even companions – most likely those whom he considers passive and non-threatening; an older woman, for example, or one with some kind of infirmity or indisposition. But I cannot convince myself that whoever is committing these murders would be capable of conducting a normal relationship with a woman on a day-to-day basis. I believe him to have a degree of destructive fascination about women, but it is also coupled with considerable fear and aversion.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Why do *you* think?”

“Formative experience, I would imagine,” replies Will thoughtfully. “A disturbed relationship with a relative, probably his mother.”

“Or grandmother; there is a tradition in the East End for extended family units and children are often raised by all manner of individuals. But yes, I completely agree.” Hannibal pauses and narrows his eyes slightly before adding: “You obviously believed the same all along – you should try to have the courage of your convictions.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” says Will vaguely. “Regardless, I need to talk with Jack Crawford first thing tomorrow…the investigation’s veering off on the wrong track again.”

“Yes, the emphasis on ‘vice’ is somewhat of a smokescreen; they are hardly going to locate their suspect by focussing on known opponents of prostitution.”

“Exactly.”

“This housemate of yours seems like a rather singular person.”

“She is,” says Will enthusiastically. “Intelligent and discerning, but very irreverent and lively with it. I think you’d like her.”

“And do you like her?”

“Yes, very much.” He realises Hannibal is staring at him. “Not like *that*,” he adds self-consciously.

Hannibal smiles very faintly at the vehemence of the denial. “And is that all you wished to ask?”

“That’s all.”

“Indeed? Such a very simple query? Very well. In that case I believe it is my turn.”

“What?” says Will distractedly. And then: “Oh yes. Quid pro quo.”

“Quid pro quo,” repeats Hannibal, drawing out each syllable. “Although there are so many things I should like to ask you that one scarcely knows where to begin. However I suppose I must prioritise my curiosity mustn’t I? In which case my query is: I should like you to tell me what caused you to leave America.”

Will glances up sharply. “I told you. I was ill.”

“I know you did. However, I should like you to tell me what *else*.”

Will flinches, and then before he can prevent it blurts out “How did you…” before checking himself and falling silent. Hannibal continues watching him meditatively; the glance is impassive yet oddly inviting, and under the force of it Will can feel his resolve crumbling. “Because of things I did…that I’ve done,” he finally says.

“And what did you do?”

“Oh God…I *can’t*,” replies Will, a bit despairingly. “I can’t tell you. We agreed…you said that I didn’t have to discuss anything I didn’t want to.”

“I did. I also said that I expected you to explain why.”

“Because…because it’s hard to talk about. It’s hardly something I’m proud of.”

“You are ashamed?”

“Yes, I’m ashamed.” He hesitates and then adds in a quieter voice: “And I know if I tell you then you’ll think about me differently.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer immediately, just runs his eyes over Will’s face. Then he abruptly leans forward, as if something has just fallen into place.

“You are aware of my high regard,” he says softly, “so know that there is nothing you could confide in me that would make me think any less of you; I believe that anything you tell me would be accounted for within its…context.” Will glances up; Hannibal leans in a little bit further. “Even if it were something *very bad indeed*.” Another pause. “Even–if–you–told–me–you–had–killed–someone.” Hannibal snaps back into his original positon and Will opens his mouth and then closes it again.

“So,” says Hannibal after the silence has stretched out to an almost unbearable pitch. “Still nothing to say?” And then when Will numbly shakes his head: “Very well; then I believe I have another question owing to me. That ostler who waylaid you the other day; the one who tried to assault you.” Hannibal’s voice is low and resonant now, with a rhythmic cadence to it that’s almost musical. “Tell me – how did you feel when you heard that he had been murdered?”

Will feels every single drop of blood drain away from his face. “Mr Froideveaux told you?” Hannibal neither confirms nor denies this, merely continues to fix Will in place with the same inscrutable stare. “I…I was shocked.”

“Yes, I dare say. But it was more than that wasn’t it? You were *concerned*. You are concerned right now.”

“Yes,” replies Will faintly.

“*Yes*,” confirms Hannibal. “Still so mute, Will? Is that really all the reply you’re intending to make?”

“What else can you possibly expect me to say?”

“The reason you are so alarmed.” Hannibal pauses again, taking a few more moments to admire Will’s beautiful, haunted face. “Why *are* you so alarmed, Will? Is it because you knew where he lived?”

“What difference does that make?” says Will, a bit desperately. “So did you!”

“Yes. But I am not concerned, and you are. Why? Because of the blackouts and the lost time – and because you knew where he lived?”

“I’m not concerned. I have no reason to be. I haven’t done anything! Why are you pushing this? You…you don’t seriously think…?”

“I don’t think anything. That is why I am asking questions rather than stating hypotheses. I merely wish – to know.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” says Will in a small, stiff voice.

“Your hands are shaking Will. Why is that?” Hannibal glances complacently down at his own. “Mine don’t shake.”

“That’s because you don’t have to be interrogated by people like you,” snaps Will, then promptly feels guilty.

“Are you still sleepwalking?”

“I don’t know…Yes. Possibly.”

“Still losing time?”

“How did you know?” asks Will sharply. “I didn’t tell you about that.” Hannibal raises his eyebrows and looks inscrutable. “How did you know!”

“You told me of course, Will,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “How else could I possibly have known?” And Will falters, suddenly afraid that his memory really is failing; that perhaps he’s no longer able to reliably account for what he has and hasn’t done. “Still taking the prescription I gave you?” Hannibal adds pointedly.

“*Yes*. I said that I would. Look, this is…this is *enough*. You’re pushing this beyond any kind of reasonable limit. I said you could ask me questions, I didn’t say you could try and…” he trails off, suddenly aware that he’s not entirely sure what it is that Hannibal’s trying to achieve.

“So what are you going to do?” asks Hannibal, serenely composed as ever.

“Actually,” snaps Will, “I’m going to leave.” *So fuck you*. He’s not anticipating any kind of objection (Hannibal seeming far too poised and self-possessed to lower himself to plead for someone’s presence) and so is genuinely surprised to be fumbling at the door handle and feel a sudden hand press down on his shoulder.

“There is no need to go Will,” says Hannibal in an unusually gentle voice. “I am not trying to vex you.”

“No? So what are you trying to do?” snaps Will without turning round.

There’s a slight pause, and then Hannibal replies: “Merely to understand you.”

“Well you’re accomplishing one much better than the other.” Will is still refusing to make eye contact, although even in the midst of his confusion and distressed irritation he’s conscious of a wary alarmed sense that hisses: *Jesus, he can move so fast*.

“You are quite right. I apologise.”

“I don’t think you mean that at all. I think you’re just sorry that you’ve been called out on it, not because you did it in the first place. Actually, not even that,” adds Will, warming to his theme. “I don’t think you’re remotely sorry, you’re just posturing: you’re trying to placate me. You think you were justified. The invasiveness, and the inappropriateness, and…and the *calculatedness*.”

“’Calculatedness’ is a truly woeful excuse for a noun, Will,” says Hannibal with a faint smile.

“Oh for God’s sake,” says Will, although he’s started to smile too. Hannibal’s hand is still resting on his shoulder, and he realises it hasn’t yet occurred to him to shake it off.

“And you are quite correct. I am sorry to have upset you, but I am not sorry for enquiring.”

“Why? Why aren’t you sorry?”

“As I said – I wish to understand you better.” Hannibal now puts his left hand on Will’s other shoulder and slowly turns him round so they’re facing each other. “You strike me as someone

who is very brilliant, yet very troubled, and who is engaged in a pursuit that he is not equipped to fully comprehend. Consider, Will: these predators whom you pursue; the ones with whom you can empathise so well. You know that they end up destroyed by what they are. My ambition is that you do not end up being destroyed in the same way."

As Will stares back numbly, unsure of how to respond – unsure of how he even feels about what's just been said – Hannibal releases him and steps away. "You told me that it was getting harder and harder to make yourself look," he adds. "What I am proposing is that you no longer have to look alone. But in order to look with you I need to understand you; and that is why I am asking you these questions. Do you see?"

"Yes," says Will faintly.

"Yes – you see so much don't you? And so much to unnerve, unsettle and torment."

"Oh God," snaps Will, suddenly exhausted with the whole thing. "Just…just – *don't*." His fingers are still clinging to the door handle, arm twisted awkwardly behind his back, and it would be so easy to simply push it open and walk away; it would be the easiest thing in the world, and yet he doesn't. *Why don't I,* thinks Will. *Why don't I go?*

Hannibal, as if reading his thoughts, reaches out instead to open the door and then begins to shepherd Will through it, one hand still on his shoulder. "Come," he says, "put on your coat. I would like us to go out somewhere."

Will promptly spins round, wanting to argue – or even refuse outright – but simultaneously aware that the lure of venturing off together feels a bit too enticing to resist. Hannibal raises a questioning eyebrow and Will finally succumbs to temptation and simply asks "Where do you want to go?" while hoping that he sounds more in control of himself than he actually feels.

Hannibal smiles again, and then reaches out and deftly tucks a strand of Will's hair behind his ear. "To see something beautiful."

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They walk to Marylebone Road where Hannibal locates a hackney cab almost immediately (being, Will notes with envy, the type of person who can flag down a driver with a single twitch of an eyebrow as opposed to being forced to stand in the street and wave your arms around in increasing desperation) and gives the directions as Hampstead Heath. "Right you are sir," says the driver jovially, and the ease of acceptance somehow surprises Will because 'Hampstead Heath' strikes him as having a bucolic, countrified ring to it that seems implausible for convenient access so late in the afternoon. In this respect he also realises that the cab itself is somewhat of a surprise because he'd anticipated Hannibal to keep a private carriage, or even a coach…although perhaps such a thing would hardly be feasible in the centre of London?

"Are we going to the countryside?" he asks once they're seated; but Hannibal just smiles serenely and refuses to answer, which makes Will smile too and roll his eyes before gazing out the window while concentrating on not toppling sideways each time the cab rocks over a

particularly uneven stretch of cobblestones. Hannibal in turn gazes at Will, noting with pleasure the lively interest the latter takes in everything that's happening outside ("Baker Street's near here isn't it? Did you know people actually write to Sherlock Holmes? There was a letter in the newspaper saying he should be put on The Ripper investigation, Mr Crawford nearly had a *fit*…There's that flower seller again, I saw her the other day. I should buy something next time, I could give them to my landlady. Unless she thought it was too forward; she might be offended. Do you think she'd be offended?…Look, that man's a pickpocket – see the way he's sidling behind the guy in the greatcoat? I bet he's going to go for his watch chain; I wonder if I should shout something?...Oh – no, too late…) and musing over how anyone can be so effortlessly bright-eyed and lovely and earnest; and so very, *very* charming. In this respect there are ample opportunities for admiration because the journey takes a long time. *God knows how much it'll cost*, thinks Will (no wonder the driver was so cheerful) but they reach their destination eventually…and which initially seems something of an anti-climax in the sense of presenting nothing more exciting than a scrubby stretch of hill.

"Now we shall have to walk, I'm afraid," says Hannibal.

Will, who likes roaming around, is not discouraged by this and sets off at a vigorous stride. He's half expecting Hannibal, who appears so luxurious and leisurely in many way, to struggle to keep up with him; and is rather surprised (and not entirely pleased) to discover that the latter is more than capable of matching his pace – even overtaking him towards the end when Will is contemplating running out of breath. It takes a while to reach the summit and Will is gazing at the spread of trees and straggling vegetation, all inky and funereal in the half-light, and desperately trying to think of something polite to say about them that sounds more appreciative than 'Wow. Trees…amazing' when Hannibal says: "Turn around."

Will does so and promptly draws in his breath, because literally the whole of London appears spread out before him in a magnificently detailed panorama: Westminster Abbey's gothic glory to the far right, the unmistakable dome and spires of St Paul's Cathedral in the centre, a sliver of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben to the other side, and the numerous wharves and warehouses that flank the banks of the Thames sprinkled in between; everything in perfect miniature like an architectural model and all illuminated by the buttery yellow of the setting sun amid countless flares and speckles of light from houses and street lamps as if thousands of fireflies are weaving and dancing together. Will's never seen anything like it in his life, and feels like he ought to make some kind of weighty and eloquent observation to mark the occasion (of the kind he suspects Hannibal himself would make on beholding such a spectacle for the first time) but ultimately opts for sincerity instead and simply announces in a fervent tone: "It's incredible; completely stunning. Thank you for showing me."

"You are quite welcome. It is certainly very…singular. And worth observing at least once."

Will glances over at this, intrigued by the tone of voice with which it's spoken. "You don't just mean the literal view, do you?" he asks after a pause.

"Don't I?" says Hannibal with a faint smile.

"No…I don't think you do." Will pauses for a few more seconds, trying to think of the right way to express it. "I think you're looking at this in the same way other people would look a

painting or a piece of sculpture. You appreciate the aesthetics of it, but you're also interpreting what it *means*. You're inspecting it but you're also evaluating it."

Hannibal's smile broadens at this, but instead of confirming or refuting it merely raises a gloved hand and sweeps it from one side to the other as if capturing the skyline. "To do such a thing as you propose would mean I was trying to gauge its creator's design," he finally says. "And indeed, when seen like this, it glitters and shimmers with beauty. The cathedral and abbey evoke virtue and sanctity; the political buildings suggest stability, lawfulness and power. Yet while London is generally seen as the centre of the civilised world, behind the scenes it seethes and heaves with iniquity, violence and suffering. It is both glamorous and monstrous; and it typifies the fine, fine line between beauty and horror."

"I understand," says Will, slightly mesmerised by this calm deconstruction of something's he always felt but invariably struggled to express.

"Yes," replies Hannibal, and now he's turned away from the view and is looking at Will. "I know you do."

Will frowns slightly, without even really being aware of why, and then shivers as a spiteful gust of wind scratches across his face. In fact the air generally feels thin and raw up here – this solitary eyrie above the city heights – and he hunches his shoulders and digs his hands into his pockets to try and preserve a few scraps of heat.

"Cold?" says Hannibal.

"A little. You notice everything don't you?"

Instead of answering Hannibal sighs in a long-suffering way, as if Will's inability to remain warm is a source of profound personal dissatisfaction, then unfastens his own coat and stands behind Will so he can enfold him in it. It feels sheltered and secure, and though Will is aware that he should probably find it embarrassing or awkward to be pulled against Hannibal's chest with the latter's arms encircling him, it somehow seems too natural and comfortable to make any sort of objection. Without any of his usual self-consciousness, he removes his hands from his pockets and grips onto the coat to hold it in place; and Hannibal's fingers lightly brush over his as they remain fixed in place to admire the view.

"You look like you've got two heads," says Will eventually.

"Hardly."

"No doubt it'll end up in the papers: 'Mysterious Two-Headed Figure Spotted on Hampstead Heath.'"

"Well, any passers-by *might* think that – or alternatively they will simply assume that it is two people who are sharing a coat. But I'm sure you are right and that the two-headed man theory would be the most convincing."

"'Distressing Two-Headed Figure Still at Large: Scotland Yard Announces Itself Baffled.'"

“Quite. No doubt we present a moving and tragic spectacle to all compassionate minds.”

“Well, we do.”

“Indeed.”

“An anatomical curiosity,” says Will with morbid relish.

“Very much the museum piece.”

“Oh yes; I wonder what our admission charge would be?”

“Something substantial, I’m sure, for such a structural marvel. Or even a metaphysical concept: two minds and one heart.”

“You wouldn’t want my mind,” says Will gloomily. He can feel Hannibal’s face pressing against his hair and briefly closes his eyes.

“That makes it sound as if you are offering it to me.”

“Well I’m not,” says Will in a firm voice before adding, somewhat more mournfully, “but even if I was…you wouldn’t want it.”

“And yet you disdain it yourself and are so eager to give it away. Your beautiful mind. Surely I am a better judge than you are of my willingness to accept it?”

“Beauty and horror,” replies Will tonelessly. He realises that he has absolutely no idea of what to add beyond this; and yet – unusually – such mute indecisiveness doesn’t bother him. Equally unusual, at least in terms of his general social discomfiture, is the rather liberating sense that Hannibal doesn’t care either.

“Beauty and horror,” repeats Hannibal, as if to confirm this. “And remember that we have recently established what a fine line exists between the two.” Almost imperceptibly he tightens his grip on Will; and Will, rather than pulling away, arches his back against Hannibal’s chest and leans into the pressure. “Striking, isn’t it? Consider that no one else is here right now – in this moment, we are the only people in the entire world with this view; all this beauty and horror. Just you and I.”

“I know,” says Will, rather breathlessly. “Just us.” Contrary to his usual instinct to resist confederacy of any kind, he realises he’s rather taken with the idea: a circle of two, drawing one another in, and united in a perspective that no one else can share. There’s something elevating about it – empowering, even – like a secret nobody can take away. He can feel Hannibal’s long fingers moving over his and, without even thinking about it, moves his own hands to allow them to entwine together. Then he closes his eyes again and allows his head to tip back very slightly against Hannibal’s shoulder; the better to hear his voice as his mouth brushes against Will’s ear and repeats in a tone that’s low and intense and as rhythmic as a heartbeat: “Just us.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> The marvelous graham_cracker has not only coined the term Clueless Victorian Will2k16 (which has now replaced my mental running subtitle of 'This Dangerous Game: The Adventures of Sassy Victorian Will') but has also done a lovely coat-sharing illustration to go with the last chapter which made me squeal with delight (seriously, you should hear me ranting on about the precious fanart – I sound like Gollum).
>
> And while on the subject of delight…a huge collective thanks to everyone who's been leaving comments in support of this story – I've been so touched by it and it means the world to me. This is my first attempt at writing in a 3rd person style and I've found it way more difficult & time-consuming than expected (my 1st fic was 1st person and practically wrote itself compared to this monster) so the reader feedback has been invaluable and really helped keep my confidence and writing energy ticking away over an already massive word count. You are wonderful: appreciative hugs and highest of fives to all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will doesn't have particularly high hopes that Jack Crawford is going to take his new theory about the investigation seriously, but likewise knows he has no choice but to at least *try* and so forces himself to go to the latter's office and run the gauntlet regardless. Jack sits in silence the entire time, staring at Will with a half-frown on his face (which by the end Will is itching to reach over and slap off) and occasionally sighing and sticking his hands in his waistcoat pockets. After a while he removes his hands and drums them on the desk top instead, then seems to change his mind halfway through and returns them to his waistcoat again.

Will, who has been watching the progress of Jack Crawford's hands with something like fascination, decides that two can play that (admittedly pointless) game and brings his own down onto the desk with an emphatic thumping noise to punctuate his concluding point: "… And so, *sir*," he says sharply, "I believe that the emphasis on social reformers is badly misguided."

There's a pause and then Jack's hands emerge from their dark hiding place and begin twirling a pencil in a needlessly elaborate way. *Frustrated ambitions to join a marching band sir?* thinks Will with irritation. "You mean one of those 'sex maniacs'?" Jack finally says, carefully pronouncing each syllable to showcase his knowledge of the correct medical terminology. In fact it's so ponderously done that Will is tempted to give him a sarcastic round of applause and beg him to repeat it. *What's that you say sir? A what maniac sir? A SEX maniac? Oh go on Mr Crawford, say it again sir, please sir – just for me sir – what EXACT variety of maniac…*

“Yes, it *had* been considered,” adds Jack pompously. There’s a small, loaded pause. “That is to say…” *Go on sir: do it! Sexmaniacsexmaniacsexmaniac*, “that the assailant is a *sex maniac* but it hardly seems plausible.”

This is so entirely anticipated that Will can’t even be bothered to get annoyed, opting for weary resignation instead (while allowing himself an internal groan at the bonus usage of ‘sex maniac’).“Why on earth not?” is all he replies.

“Because there’s absolutely no evidence that any of the victims were…um…interfered with,” says Jack heavily. His hands, temporarily cowed into submission, drop the pencil and neatly fold themselves on top of each other as if they’ve gone to sleep.

“That’s a somewhat simplistic way of viewing it. And if I may say so sir, rather old-fashioned.”

“Oh? In what way.”

“I agree that he’s not necessarily doing this for straightforward erotic gratification, but the absence of sexual assault doesn’t preclude a sexually driven motive; the act of stabbing itself can constitute a form of penetration.” Jack wriggles in his chair and looks profoundly uncomfortable. “Look Mr Crawford, it goes without saying this individual has an aberrant sexuality but what I’m emphasising to you is a fear and dislike of *women* – not merely a moral objection to prostitutes.”

“Well it’s rather contrary to the prevailing views,” replies Jack, although he sounds less adamant than previously.

“Dr Lecter agrees with me,” Will hears himself saying.

Jack raises his eyebrows. “Hannibal Lecter? You seem to be spending quite a lot of time at his house.”

“Hardly,” snaps Will. “I’ve only been there a few times – mostly on your instruction.”

“Well don’t allow yourself to be overly influenced. I know he’s very impressive and all that sort of thing, but he’s not an oracle. You need to keep an open mind to various expert opinions.”

“You mean like Dr Chilton?” says Will sarcastically. He’s not expecting to be allowed to get away with this, but to his surprise Jack merely laughs and then actually reaches over the desk and pats him on the wrist; Will stares down at it afterwards in vague disbelief.

“Well you’ve certainly made a compelling case,” says Jack. “I’ll be frank with you, I doubt I’ll be able to convince the Chief Superintendent to cease all enquiries into known opponents of prostitution, but I’ll personally see to it that the net gets widened beyond that.”

“Thank you,” says Will in surprise.

“No need to thank me; I should be thanking you if anything. And personally I agree with you: Dr Lecter seems to know what he’s talking about.”

“Did you attend the dinner party?” asks Will. He knows he’s being childish, but even though he could have chosen to go he still resents the fact Jack has been socialising with Hannibal without Will being present.

“I did.”

“Good?”

“Extremely; you should have come. Excellent wine. And the food was extraordinary.”

“What did you have?”

“I can hardly remember the names of half of it. One of the dishes had heart in it though, I remember that. All very exotic; I suppose it’s the European influence. Mainland Europe that is.”

“Where’s he from originally?” asks Will in a casual voice.

”I’m not entirely sure. One of those Eastern countries I think, although I believe he’s lived in several different places. People say he prepares the food himself but I’d be *very* surprised if that were true. I’ll bet he has a fleet of chefs behind the scenes that no one knows about.”

“Perhaps,” says Will politely, while not believing for a second that this is actually the case.

“At any rate it’s hard not to envy those sort of frighteningly competent individuals who seem to be hugely talented at whatever they turn their hand to,” Jack adds in an amicable voice. “Speaking of which, I take it he agreed with you about the murderer not having formal medical knowledge?”

“He did. Also that the letter to the press was a hoax.”

“What about there being two separate perpetrators?”

Will frowns, unsure of whether he’s actually put this directly to Hannibal; at any rate he can’t remember the latter expressing an opinion about it one way or the other. Although no doubt he’d agree with Will; almost certainly he would. “Yes, he does,” Will says out loud.

Jack nods thoughtfully, at which point his hands promptly awake from slumber and spring for the pencil again in order to make a note on the large ledger in front of them. “There was another death recently,” Jack adds while scribbling. “You probably won’t have heard about it; it barely made a mention in the press. An ostler from one of those upmarket hotels.”

“Ohhhh,” says Will faintly.

“Organs removed,” adds Jack in an abrupt voice. “But this time there were some key differences in the wound pattern and arranging of the body. If I was a cynic I’d say it was the original murderer deliberately staging a scene to deflect attention and make it look like something else, but from what you’ve said he’s too chaotic and disorganised to plan ahead like that?”

“The so-called Ripper – definitely yes,” says Will after a pause. “Regarding the first perpetrator; then no…almost certainly not.”

“We think it might have been an escaped inmate from Dr Chilton’s asylum. It was certainly frenzied enough for it. At any rate it was either someone very cunning who wanted the body to appear a certain way, or someone very distressed who wasn’t in control of what they were doing. But the one thing I am delighted to say it *wasn’t* is Jack the Ripper. And so the City force can have it, and welcome, and the Ripper gets left for the Met.”

“Great,” says Will in a voice which clearly indicates it’s anything but.

“I completely concur with your lack of enthusiasm,” replies Jack wryly, “but I’m afraid we have no choice in the matter.”

“No choice,” repeats Will bleakly. “I know; none at all.”

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Will leaves Scotland Yard with a renewed sense of churning dread and trudges out of Whitehall Place and towards Charing Cross with no clear sense of where he’s heading except that it needs to be in the general direction of ‘away.’ He ends up in Trafalgar Square and takes refuge behind one of the stone lions before he sees a woman selling birdseed in brown paper bags and is overtaken with an irresistible urge to do something as innocent and unthreatening as loiter in front of Nelson’s Column and join the throngs of tourists in scattering seed for the London pigeons. A very young boy in tattered trousers and a dirty woollen cap comes sidling over, obviously longing to feed the birds but lacking the necessary farthings for his own paper bag, so Will kneels down to share his and they stay like that for a while in companionable silence. The pigeons are plump, sleek and absurdly tame – an example of nature abandoning raw instinct and living off charity instead – and Will is just beginning to contemplate calming down when a horribly familiar voice comes grating and shrieking into earshot and signals the imminent arrival of Freddy Lounds. The pigeons flutter off in alarm and the child gives a wail of dismay.

“Don’t worry, they’ll come back,” says Will, fighting an urge to begin wailing himself. He straightens up just as Freddy reaches him and forces himself to turn round.

“Feeding *pigeons* Will?” asks Freddy miming incomprehension.

“Well, yes – obviously,” replies Will carelessly while secretly wishing he could have been caught doing something a bit more dignified. Freddy just leers in lieu of a response and Will frowns at him and waves his arm in the direction of Charing Cross. “I suppose you followed me from Scotland Yard?”

“Of course,” replies Freddy, not even pretending to hide it.

“And?”

“And what Will?”

“Well I assume you didn’t just come to watch me feeding pigeons, so stop wasting my time and tell me what you want.”

“You seem to be wasting your time rather effectively without any help from me,” says Freddy, “but seeing as you asked so nicely I suppose I could come straight to the point. Not here though; somewhere quiet.” He scans around in an exaggeratedly earnest way and then nods towards the entrance of St James’ Park. “There.”

“No – here.”

“Oh *Will*,” says Freddy, almost playfully. “It’s more for your sake than mine. Trust me, this isn’t something you’ll want anyone to overhear.”

“What, you’re concerned for my wellbeing now?”

“All right, officer, you’ve got me,” says Freddy holding up his hands. “Bang to rights! I admit, I just don’t want anything that could risk an exclusive for *The Tattle Crime*. But while our motives vary the means are the same, so you might as well come along with me.” He places his hand on Will’s elbow with the same forced intimacy that was exhibited to such unsettling effect in their last meeting, and Will frowns and shrugs it off.

“Stop doing that,” he says sharply. “Stop touching me.”

“Why would I do that, Will?” asks Freddy in a loathsome, false-innocent tone. “Why would I stop, when the whole purpose of this is demonstrate how touchable you actually are?”

“You have no principles at all do you?” says Will in a voice heavy with contempt.

“Sticks and stones Will,” replies Freddy blithely. “Now be a good lad and come round here – behind the pavilion where no one’s going to hear us. I can understand you’re upset, but you can’t say I didn’t give you fair warning. I told you what I was planning to do – and of course I did it, just like I said. You see, I’ve finally heard back from Baltimore. I know about it Will. I know why they sent you over here, why they were so keen to get rid of you. I’ve had letters from old colleagues of yours. I’ve had copies of the newspaper clippings. I’ve even had letters from Mr Hobbs’ daughter. Poor Miss Abigail – she had plenty to tell me about *you*.” Freddy pauses and squints his right eye as if taking aim with an invisible gun. “I know all about it Will. I know *everything*.”

“It certainly seems that way,” replies Will. His voice is ostensibly calm, but inside he’s screaming with the helpless, hopeless knowledge that everything’s about to go to hell and there’s absolutely *nothing* he can do to stop it. It’s like a clasping, clawed hand has reached out from his past and is about to drag him down into the miring slime and filth – the brutal, bloody nightmare of that hideous time – and all he can do is watch it happen: defencelessly ensnared between the horrors of the past, the terror of the future and the utter torment of the present moment. Wretchedly he thinks of the tentative attempts at friendship he’s managed to establish since he’s been here – Mrs Bloom, Margot, Price, Zeller, even Jack…Hannibal, oh God, him more than anyone else – and the expressions they’ll have when they read the reports in the paper. The winces of distaste, the shudders, the revulsion, the shocked blanched faces...

“What, that’s it?” says Freddy mockingly, his grating voice abruptly jolting Will back into the present. “That’s all you’ve got to say? Not going to beg and plead?”

“Hardly. It’s not as if it would do any good.”

“Oh I don’t know about *that*,” says Freddy. “No need to be quite so pessimistic. Why do you think I came here in the first place – just to give you forewarning? Just as a *courtesy*? No no no, you’ve missed the point Will. I’m here to make you an offer.”

“What do you mean?” asks Will slowly. “Be. More. Specific.”

“Well…I’m not suggesting I won’t publish eventually of course; I won’t lie to you Will, the story’s too good. On the other hand, I *could* be persuaded to postpone it; perhaps even postpone it for a week. Perhaps even two. *Maybe* even three. It would all depend on exactly how much effort you were prepared to put into persuading me.”

He lowers his eyes to Will’s mouth in a horribly obvious leering way then allows them to crawl further down, flicking and slithering his gaze until Will finds himself flinching and taking an involuntary step backwards. Despite his best efforts to quell it he feels profoundly sickened and disturbed; not least because the proposition clearly has absolutely nothing to do with desire as opposed to having everything to do with humiliation and control – in effect, the twisted finale of Freddy’s revenge play. Doubtless even if he did go through with it Freddy would be drumming his fingers with impatience the entire time, irritably glancing at his watch and telling Will to hurry up and get on with it.

“No,” he says firmly, with a calmness that’s entirely feigned. “Absolutely not. You must be out of your mind to even suggest it.”

Freddy merely smiles and begins to inspect his fingernails as if they’re far more fascinating than anything Will could possibly say or do. “Are you sure about that?” he finally adds. “*Really* sure? You know this isn’t a bluff Will. I’ll publish. I can ruin you with this story, and all you have to do to delay that happening is to stop being your usual arrogant self and make a bit of effort to keep me happy. It would actually do you good to be a bit humble for once – character building, in fact. You should be grateful. How many other reporters of my stature do you think would give you a reprieve?”

He takes a slow, sauntering pace forwards; and for a few desolate seconds Will actually falters. It would be terrible of course. *Unbearable* (he can’t even really imagine how unbearable it would be) but it would still purchase a delay; a stay of execution, as it were. And then – who knows? Anything could happen in a few weeks, anything at all. And it would at least give him an opportunity to explain; to prepare people properly. Give them his own version of events rather than whatever twisted, disfigured counterfeit Freddy’s intending to splash across the London newsstands. Will bites his lower lip so hard he can taste blood and stares wretchedly at the floor, unable to bring himself to refuse outright and lose the last shred of hope; but likewise unable to commit to going through with something so grotesque. But then, as if scenting weakness, a pale spindly hand comes creeping triumphantly towards him; and his wavering resolve comes flooding back full force because in that instant Will knows, beyond all reasonable doubt, that if it succeeds in making contact he won’t be responsible for his actions. With lightening quick reflexes, honed over years of evading

sundry assaults and invasions, he darts out and seizes Freddy's wrist; gripping on until he can feel the delicate bones grind together and have the satisfaction of seeing Freddy's face give a twitching grimace of pain.

"Then publish it," Will says quietly. He tightens his hold and this time Freddy gasps and begins to struggle in a fraught, panicky way. "All you'll have accomplished is disrupting a major murder enquiry – and endangering countless more women – simply for the sake of a few extra newspaper sales. You're the one who has to sleep at night."

"I sleep *perfectly*," hisses Freddy. He aims a feeble kick at Will's legs, who neatly sidesteps it and twists round until Freddy's arm is wrenched behind his back.

"And for your own sake, Mr Lounds," adds Will in the same low, intense voice, "*do not keep pushing me*. Because you won't like it when I push back."

"Let me go, you bastard." Freddy's voice has taken on an unmistakable streak of fear. "Are you *mad*? You're going to break my arm."

Will holds on for a few more seconds then with a wince of disgust flings Freddy away from him before brushing his fingers against his coat as if he's handled something unclean; and Freddy, in turn, makes a feral, whimpering sound as he cradles his arm and stumbles backwards away from Will. "You're going to regret this," he snarls, even as he's cringing and retreating. "When this piece comes out I'll *bury* you. I'll *crucify* you. They're going to have to send you back where you came from in a fucking *casket*."

But when he glance up to gauge the effect of his words, Will has already gone.

*****

Will stumbles out of St James' Park in a delirious haze of misery, fear and nauseous panicky horror that requires every single shred of self-control to not simply stagger into the nearest alleyway and vomit onto the reeking cobblestones. He feels like people are staring at him even though it can't realistically be the case, and with a final wrench of self-possession hails the first hackney carriage he sees and asks it to take him to Harley Street. He knows the more sensible, responsible option would be to head back to Scotland Yard and speak to Jack, but in a way that Will can't fully process he knows that Hannibal's reaction is going to be the benchmark by which all the others are measurable: if Hannibal accepts him, then other rejections will be easier to bare; if not, then other acceptance will lose its value. No other forbearance matters except Hannibal's and likewise no other condemnation is going to hurt in the same way.

Hannibal takes one look at Will's face when he arrives and ushers him into the consulting room, steering him by the elbow while calling over his shoulder to Mary: "Please cancel all remaining appointments for today. Give them my apologies and tell them I am indisposed."

"Oh but sir," says Mary uncertainly, "remember that Lady Hamilton and her daughter…"

"I am afraid they shall have to wait," replies Hannibal crisply and closes the door with a decided *click*. "Now then, Will. What is the matter?"

Will opens his mouth and closes it again, briefly overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead, and then just stares numbly with wide unhappy eyes. “I suppose something has happened?” says Hannibal encouragingly.

“Yes,” replies Will in a small voice.

“And I assume you wish to tell me about it, which shows good judgement on your part as I am ready to listen. Take your time – as you have heard I am in no hurry.”

“I hope I haven’t…” begins Will, and Hannibal waves away the concern with a flick of the wrist.

“If you were inconveniencing me I would have said so,” he adds. “Now – sit. Do you need anything? A drink perhaps?”

“No…nothing to drink. Thank you.”

“Well then,” says Hannibal, coiling himself into the chair opposite Will’s. “Whatever it is you would probably do better to blurt it out. I find discretion to be the lesser part of valour in situations like these.”

Will, obediently, decides to blurt. “I’m being blackmailed,” he says.

“Oh, indeed? By whom?”

“A journalist. Freddy Lounds. He writes for that awful *Tattle Crime* thing.”

“Yes, I am aware of it.” Contrary to expectation, Hannibal doesn’t proceed to ask why or for what, merely stares at Will, poised and infinitely patient, to see what he’s going to do.

“He said that he would publish things about me,” Will finally says. “About my past…things that happened in America.”

“He wishes for money?”

“No. No – money would have been a lot simpler, even though I don’t actually have any.” Will laughs in a bitter, humourless way. “He wants *me*. But I couldn’t do that. God. I *can’t*.” Briefly he imagines the spidery, ink-stained fingers crawling over him and gives a visible shudder. “But you see, that makes it even *worse*.”

“How so?”

“Because it makes me feel guilty…because if I could just force myself to do it then he’d delay publishing and I’d be able to stay on the case for a few more weeks. It’s like I’m putting myself before all the lives I could have saved…” Will trails off, suddenly anguished and overcome.

“I don’t care about the lives you save,” says Hannibal briskly, “I care about *your* life. And you have nothing to feel responsible for. The culpability for this lies with Mr Lounds and absolutely no one else.” Will is still staring defeatedly at the floor, and so misses the

unearthly flicker of anger that runs across Hannibal's face as he says this; the way his grip tightens on the armrest until his knuckles turn white. "I am very sorry for this Will, but the situation is not as bleak as it appears. I assume Jack Crawford is aware of these events in America?"

"I don't know…I guess so. Yes. No. Oh God, I don't know. Maybe not the full extent. But I suppose he'll know something. The Commissioner would have had to have told him."

"Well then. His opinion is the only one that matters and it is not destined to be swayed by something of which he was already aware. Admittedly it is possible that the general public will grow shrill and self-righteous when the article is published – which it has a regrettable tendency to do – but if there is any great objection to your formal presence at Scotland Yard then Jack Crawford can still publicly let you go while continuing to consult your expertise as a private individual."

"Do you think so?" asks Will, hope suddenly making him look young and vulnerable.

"I am entirely certain. Remember that Jack Crawford's attachment to you is not clouded by sentiment. The question of doing the right thing by you does not arise – his sole prerogative is catching this maniacal individual, and he can do that far more efficiently with your help than without it."

When laid out in such a cool, logical way this all seem eminently plausible and Will can feel the first stirrings of calm flow back into him. "Thank you," he says quietly.

"For what?"

"For being so kind."

"You sound as if you are not particularly accustomed to it. You don't readily anticipate kindness, do you?"

"No," says Will with a rather touching simplicity; and Hannibal's expression softens slightly.

"Well, I am happy to have subverted your expectations."

"I wish I could offer to do something in return…"

"Oh yes – quid pro quo. Regardless, I have not done anything particularly deserving of reward; merely listened and counselled. However, if you *are* wishing to reciprocate, then there is something I would like."

"What?" asks Will, even though he already knows what it's going to be.

Hannibal leans forward slightly. "I should like you to tell me what it was that caused you to leave America. You refused before – but that is what Mr Lounds is going to publish isn't it? It would appear I am destined to discover it anyway so you may as well tell me now."

Will takes a rather shaky breath and glances up, looking Hannibal directly in the eye for the first time since he arrived. "All right," he says quietly, "although you guessed yourself

anyway. I did kill someone."

"So why the reluctance?"

"Because I…oh God. It wasn't just that I killed him." Will hesitates again, although there's nothing really left now except for the truth. "It wasn't just that I killed him," he repeats, so softly that Hannibal has to lean further in to hear. "It was the *way* I did it. And what I did to the body afterwards. I…I wasn't…It was even worse than what he did to his own victims." He falters but Hannibal shows no signs of shock or revulsion, merely continues regarding him with the same implacably glinting stare. "It happened last year in Minnesota. The case wasn't totally dissimilar to this one except that the victims were younger. I mean *a lot* younger, not much more than girls. The press called him the Minnesota Shrike. Not quite as catchy as 'Jack the Ripper' but the panic still spread across State and they ended up requesting outside help. I was assigned to the investigation quite early on but what no one realised, including me, was that by that point I was getting sick. Really sick."

"The brain fever?"

"Yes. I mean, people noticed that I was behaving oddly but then I behave quite oddly anyway so…" Will gives the same humourless laugh. "Let's just say it wasn't picked up anywhere near as quickly as it would have been with someone more normal."

"And yet you solved it regardless didn't you?" says Hannibal softly. "You found him?"

"Yeah. Yeah I found him."

"And – punished him."

"Yes. To put it mildly. I was able to track him down to his house; Hobbs, that was his name. 'The house of Mr and Mrs Hobbs and their charming daughter;' and all the neighbours swearing blind what a wonderful family they were and completely unaware of what he'd been doing. His wife and daughter were there at the time. He killed the wife but his daughter escaped. She saw what I did though – the whole thing. She testified against me afterwards."

"Do you remember it?"

"A little. I…I remember how it made me feel."

"And how did it make you feel?"

There's a long pause. "*Alive.*"

"Yes Will," replies Hannibal softly. "So much life; even in the midst of dying."

"The aftermath as well," says Will abruptly, as if this last confession is too disturbing to linger over. "Christ – I remember *that*. My father was frantic; he was convinced I'd end up being hanged. I was apprehended at the scene and collapsed when they got me to the station house, and that was when they realised I was ill. They told me afterwards that I couldn't understand why they were arresting me; apparently I kept insisting that I hadn't done anything wrong. In the end the Commissioner intervened. Not on my behalf – he's never

liked me – but simply because of how bad it would have looked for the Baltimore force if I'd been charged with it. I got off on medical grounds."

"But not an insanity plea?"

"No it never went that far, thank God. Then when I was fully recovered they sent me to London. It's followed me over though. I don't just mean the newspaper exposé, but in here." He taps the side of his head. "I dream about him all the time. Sometimes I even think I can see him."

"And is he angry with you? Or merely resigned?"

"I don't know. He's just…there."

"I *see*," says Hannibal thoughtfully and he really sounds as if he does: an all-seeing I. "So, Will, tell me this – does it make it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you've done it yourself?"

"What do you think?" asks Will quietly.

"But I am not concerned with that; I know what I think. I am asking you."

"*Yes*. Of course it does."

"Yes," repeats Hannibal. "Of-course-it-does." He smiles very faintly and then abruptly swerves the course of the conversation with one of his disarming misdirections. "And now you have confided in someone, and you see that I do not think any less of you. On the contrary; I admire your courage. And your…sense of enterprise. Admittedly you did not *fully* know what you were doing, yet nevertheless you have wrenched ugliness out of the world and left something beautiful in its place. Didn't I tell you that you were an alchemist? Indeed, I find the synchronicity of the whole thing to be incredibly fascinating. Your actions have unwittingly transformed what is unworthy and useless into something artistic."

"Why on earth," says Will slowly, "would you think *that*?"

"Simple. Because the death of this man – this shambling lesser being, so artless and graceless and *pointless* – has set into motion a train of events that yields beauty and purpose."

"How?"

"Because," says Hannibal, "it brought you here to me."

Will stares back silently, suddenly overcome, and Hannibal leans forward again. "It is *rather* a pity," he says, "that the same kind of transformation cannot be enacted on Mr Lounds. It would barely even count as a crime, rather as a similar act of…alchemy. But there it is; we cannot have it all our own way." He pauses and studies Will carefully. "I suppose we shall just have to wait and see what transpires."

"That would be far too much to hope for," says Will, desperately trying to keep up with the constant swerves and twists of the discussion. "But thank you. Seriously – I'm glad I told

you." He rubs the back of his hand over his face to try and conceal how emotional he suddenly feels. "I never imagined someone could accept it so easily."

"You should have more confidence in your ability to inspire faith and fidelity in the people around you," says Hannibal. "You might surprise yourself. Indeed, I suspect the aftermath of this disclosure might not be as bleak as you fear. There are, after all, very clear extenuating circumstances."

"I suppose so. I don't know. I can't quite convince myself that it's going to be as straightforward as that but…but I appreciate what you're saying. I've never had someone understand me like that."

"How endearingly candid you are Will," says Hannibal. "It is quite irresistible."

"Not really, you've caught me when my guard's down. I'll probably regret it later."

"Well, in that case it would be extremely remiss of me not to take full advantage of it," replies Hannibal, quick as a whip. "What else have you never experienced?"

Will can't help smiling at this. "Oh for God's sake," he says. "You're completely merciless aren't you?"

"Entirely so."

"I don't even know where to start – how much time do you have? There are *lots* of things I've never experienced. I've never played an instrument, or spoken a foreign language. I've never visited mainland Europe. I've gone to the theatre to see plays but I've never heard an orchestra, or watched a ballet or opera." He falters; there are so many other absent events he could add – *I've never been particularly happy, no one has ever told me that they love me, I've never known how it feels to genuinely like or respect myself* – but even in this vulnerable interim knows that such admissions as these would be going too far.

"I could teach you a foreign language," says Hannibal who's watching him very closely again. "I know several."

"Thank you for the offer, but no. I can't help feeling you'd have me saying something incredibly inappropriate without telling me what it really means."

Hannibal smiles at this, then leans back again in his chair. "What else?" he says.

"I don't know…*lots.* I've never ridden a horse. Never had a pet. Never owned my own home. I've never been married."

"As to the last – clearly not. Why would you feel the need to state something so obvious? Are you using it as a euphemism by any chance? Are you trying to tell me that you've never been…" Hannibal gives a delicate pause, "...sexually intimate with anyone?"

"I'm saying I've never been married," replies Will irritability.

“You know,” says Hannibal with interest, “most men of your age and social class would be blushing at the implication of having conducted themselves immorally; yet here you are flushed and discomfited because you have *not*. What a wonderful heretic you are.”

“No,” says Will, reluctant to acknowledge this. “Not really.”

“So you are simply embarrassed?”

“No.”

Hannibal merely smiles serenely at this, while privately reflecting that it’s hardly a surprise. It’s difficult to imagine Will making use of a prostitute's services, and yet the alternative – marriage – is almost even harder to envisage. After all marriages, in Will’s world, are not made in heaven as opposed to drawing rooms and supper parties; overseen and engineered by strident society mothers and cultivated within the kind of settings where Will would invariably be struck mute with discomfiture (even if it were possible to persuade him to attend in the first place). Then he steeples his fingers beneath his chin and regards Will carefully, aware of a surge of something within himself that’s partly protective but also enormously – almost breathtakingly – possessive. However, he’s well aware that to even hint at such a thing would unsettle Will so simply opens his mouth to say ‘*I can take you to the opera’* before amending it at the last minute to: “We can go to the opera,” on the grounds that Will is almost certainly going to rebel at the idea of being passively escorted to anything.

“Oh,” says Will, looking pleased. “Can we?”

“Certainly we can. Or perhaps you would prefer a play? After all, there is no point going against your preference and inclination merely to check off items on a hypothetical list. There is a new production of *Pygmalion* at The Imperial which I was intending to see.”

“What’s it about?”

“Pygmalion is a character in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses.* He was a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had carved. In the play, the protagonist is a linguist who tries to teach a flower girl to speak like an aristocrat. Contrary to his sense of himself, he likewise falls in love – but the love is not reciprocated.” He pauses and looks at Will meditatively. “Transformation, you see, and the risk of falling in love with what one has tried to shape and create.”

“I think I’d like to go to the opera,” says Will, who’s only half-listening. “Something to cross off my list.”

“Of course. Tomorrow evening? *Eugene Onegin* is playing at the Royal Opera House.”

“Well, once I’ve checked my frantic social schedule,” says Will, “I think I can safely say that I’ll be available.”

“Excellent. You have something to wear?”

“What do you think?”

“I can send my tailor round to you this evening. Admittedly it is *very* short notice, but at my request he could have something ready by the afternoon.”

“No, don’t do that. It’s very kind of you – and I appreciate it – but I’ll sort it out myself. I’ll hire something.”

“*Hire* something?” says Hannibal, sounding vaguely horrified.

“I’ll hire something,” repeats Will firmly.

“Hire something…Indeed you shall. After which, no doubt, you will actually go ahead and *wear* it. I take back my former reassurance; you are clearly a moral degenerate after all. In fact I should go so far as to say you are depraved.”

“Independently depraved. It’s very generous of you, but you don’t have to keep giving me things.”

“Well in that case I suppose I have no alternative but to bear your depravity. How fortunate for me; rest assured I shall be congratulating myself all evening.”

“Then you may as well give me your approval again. After all, you’re going to have to put up with me. In *public*. You’d be tacitly approving me anyway.”

“Oh yes, there you will be – radiant with depravity the entire time. Nevertheless I remain unmoved.”

“I suppose it’ll give the society papers something to write about; ‘the esteemed Dr Lecter was seen attending the opera in the company of a depraved colonial.’”

“Indeed,” says Hannibal. “I suppose you were wearing hired evening clothes when you killed that man?”

Will laughs out loud and then stretches his legs out in front of him before running his hands through his hair. “Thank you,” he says abruptly.

“For what?”

Will looks down at the floor and then gives Hannibal a brief glance from underneath his eyelashes. “Just – thank you.”

*****

Will practically leaps out of bed the next day and sprints to the local newsstand to seize a copy of *The Tattle Crime*, so hot off the press it may as well be steaming in the frigid morning air. The front page is blissfully free of any references to himself, as are all the pages that follow; although Will knows better than to experience any kind of false assurance that Freddy’s had a change of heart. Nevertheless it’s still one more day of relative peace before everything ignites, and Will decides there’s nothing better to do than simply make the most of it.

In this respect – and despite the fact he'll probably find the actual music rather tiresome – the idea of seeing a real opera production in a real London opera house is genuinely exciting. In fact it's been so long since Will's had something to look forward to that he feels faintly giddy with it, like a child about to be taken out of school for the day. Although now it's nearly here he wonders if he was a bit too cavalier in refusing the offer of a custom-made suit. He probably wouldn't care with a different companion – if he were accompanying Jack, for example – but Hannibal possesses the type of patrician good looks that go extremely well with evening dress; whereas Will, in comparison, suspects he's going to look like one of Mr Darwin's progenital apes that's been coaxed into a tailcoat before being systematically and selectively shaved. Regardless it's too late to worry about it now, so he asks Mrs Bloom to advise on a suitable place to hire one then sets off to Jermyn Street to acquire it. However he deliberately waits until Margot has gone out before asking, because he suspects she would make some kind of light-hearted remark and while it would undoubtedly be kindly and good-humoured he feels too self-conscious and protective about the excursion to risk exposing it to any kind of levity. For the same reason he despatches a messenger to Harley Street to tell Hannibal he'll meet him at the Royal Opera House, because the mere *idea* of being collected in a hackney carriage in full view of the neighbours is almost unbearably embarrassing.

In the end the clothes look unexpectedly flattering, and when combined with the expensive coat and scarf Will experiences the novel sensation of feeling quietly satisfied with his appearance. He deliberately arrives a few minutes before the appointed time, although Hannibal is still waiting in the vestibule when he walks in: tall and poised and looking almost unfeasibly glamorous in a jet black dress coat. He smiles when he catches sight of Will and then runs his eyes over him in an approving way. "Excellent," he finally says. "You have concealed your depravity extremely well. Fortunately for you – and, it may be said, for me – your face and figure are sufficiently good to compensate for the infernal tailoring. In fact to the uninitiated I dare say you could even pass for normal."

"How simply spiffing," replies Will in an exaggeratedly upper-class English accent. And then, in his normal voice: "I won't tell if you won't."

"I am *certainly* not going to tell. I have a reputation to preserve after all."

The mention of reputations (as well as their preservation) makes Will feel temporarily overcome with a sense of bleakness at the idea of Freddy Lounds, and Hannibal immediately notices and lightly touches his shoulder. "Stay here in the present with me," he says quietly. "We don't yet know what the future shall hold, and whatever transpires you are not going to have to face it alone."

Will gives a small nod, determined to put a brave face on it, and Hannibal smiles in return in an unusually benevolent way and steers him up the stairs without removing his hand from Will's shoulder. "I have my own box," he explains when Will asks why they appear to be moving so far from the auditorium. "I prefer to appreciate the music in relative privacy, and the acoustics are also very good."

Being in possession of a private box at the Royal Opera House appears to Will to be almost absurdly opulent, although he's careful not to appear too overawed and manages to take a seat in it in a suitably restrained and dignified way before inspecting the programme with a

convincing simulacrum of cultured interest. “Tchaikovsky,” he says after a while. “I think I’ve heard of him.”

“Yes, he is very renowned and set to become more so. Destined, I would say, to be revered by future generations as one of the great composers.”

Will quietly digests this, rather taken with the idea of being in the presence of greatness that’s destined to be preserved for posterity. Not that the evening wouldn’t have been satisfying enough without it, and it’s difficult to not start fidgeting with excitement at the sheer novelty of being in such glamorous and intriguing surroundings (and, it has to be admitted, with company that’s likewise glamorous and intriguing in equal measure). Everything appears incredibly dazzling, from the scent of the limelight to the sumptuous gold and scarlet décor; and even sights and sounds that would normally be irritating (not least the pampered, prosperous audience members who are rattling fans and brandishing top hats in an ostentatious, self-satisfied way) merely come across as enjoyably farcical. When the lights dim and the performance finally starts Will peers over the balcony and into the pit, curious to catch a glimpse of the famous Tchaikovsky; and is interested to see that he’s a slight, middle-aged man with a shock of unruly hair, joyfully brandishing his baton from the rostrum like someone waving a stick for a dog. There’s something rather captivating in the idea that such a nondescript looking person could be world famous; destined, if Hannibal is correct, to defy death itself and endure for future generations as one of The Greats. Will is so accustomed to power and influence being wielded in a brutally destructive way, yet here is an example of both things used benignly, almost mundanely. Indeed, in this respect, it’s actually surprisingly easy to imagine The Great Tchaikovsky in a suburban house in Moscow propped up with his unruly hair and a quill tucked behind his ear while children run round his desk and a Mrs Tchaikovsky stands at the bottom of the stairs calling “Pyotr, come down now, the dinner will spoil again,” in a tone that’s exasperated yet fond. And then out of all that comes music that can conquer the world, and even the ages: all from a small man with wild hair and excitable hands who’s capering so boisterously he looks like he could fall off his rostrum.

The concept of this – of benign power, and force of will channelled into beauty – strikes Will in that moment as almost unbearably optimistic, and for once the wavering sense of dread and unhappiness that’s almost permanently present in his consciousness feels faintly quelled. He wishes he could share the sudden sensation with Hannibal, but can see that the latter is so engrossed in the music that it feels far too crass and clumsy to disturb him with any eagerly whispered disclosures. Perhaps Will could try to touch him in some way instead? He probably wouldn’t mind…would he? Probably not; or at least not *very* much. Will has a sudden surge of determination to give it a go, although what first arose as an impulse of the moment then becomes an all-consuming stratagem, not unlike a general plotting a military campaign (in this respect, thinks Will gloomily, Napoleon probably put less thought into invading Russia). After spending several minutes working up the courage to do it, he then invests a further five minutes trying to gauge the exact angle to aim for, and then a further few minutes (for good measure) attempting to time it perfectly before taking a deep breath and finally going in for the kill. Unfortunately the shot still goes wide and Will misjudges it at the last moment and finds himself missing Hannibal’s hand entirely and ends up clutching his wrist instead – at which point he feels consumed with awkwardness and can’t bring himself to let go as opposed to pretending that this was the plan in the first place. But Hannibal doesn’t seem at all perturbed to have his wrist suddenly seized in a rictus grip and

simply moves his own hand over Will's and gently strokes his thumb over Will's knuckles – and in the end it's not awkward at all, just natural; as if they're a comfortable, middle-aged couple whose custom of many years is to clasp hands while enjoying opera. Will, in turn, finds himself beginning to relax and even tentatively consider that maybe the whole military campaign worked out quite well after all. In fact it feels as if it worked out so successfully that he keeps hold of Hannibal's wrist for the remainder of the performance and doesn't even feel self-conscious or uncomfortable when it's time to let go in order to applaud the cast and The Great Tchaikovsky (who's as dishevelled and perspiring as if he's run a marathon, yet still looking faintly disappointed that it's all over).

"You enjoyed that?" asks Hannibal afterwards as they're returning down the staircase.

"Oh *yes*," replies Will fervently, because even though the music (as expected) wasn't all that engaging, the experience in and of itself has proven gratifying in a way that's hard to adequately describe. For a while they draw to a halt in the foyer and stare at each other in silent acknowledgement, with Will beaming in a completely uncustomary way and Hannibal considering how happy and animated Will appears (while musing on what it might be like to make him look like that all the time), before the outside world abruptly force its way in and an absurdly plummy accent is calling "Why, Dr Lecter!" and Hannibal is shifting his gaze over Will's shoulder while extravagantly rolling his eyes.

"What?" says Will, intrigued. If such a thing weren't impossible to imagine, he would expect Hannibal was about to say 'oh fuck.'

"I am afraid you must brace yourself," replies Hannibal wearily, upon which a florid man with a very red face, and a very braying voice, and a luxuriantly billowing paunch (that's threatening to fight its way out from beneath his waistcoat) descends down on them cooing like a pigeon. He's clutching his top hat in one hand and a champagne flute in the other, and proceeds to brandish both as if they're offensive weapons while repeatedly chiming "Dr Lecter, Dr *Lecter*, what a pleasant surprise."

"Good evening," says Hannibal with a smooth little smile.

"Splendid show wasn't it? Simply *splendid*," comes the complacent reply; rather as if, thinks Will, he'd not only written the music himself but performed and conducted it as well. "A total triumph. Everyone said we'd never get a London audience to appreciate Russian opera, but won't those naysayers be feeling foolish now? I mean look at this crowd." He waves his arm around the heaving foyer, at which point he catches sight of Will and then actually removes his monocle before booming out: "Well upon my word, look at you. I have to say, dear boy, that you are *exuberantly* pretty."

Will's eyebrows elevate so far up his face they're at risk of getting lost in his hair. Then he opens his mouth in anticipation of telling this appalling individual to fuck *right* off, before feeling Hannibal placing a restraining hand on his arm; whereupon the older man mistakes the silence for acquiescence and actually gives Will a little conspiratorial dig in the ribs, adding: "You really do manage to procure the most enchanting company Hannibal; how do you manage it? What's your secret? That beautifully elegant blonde lady only last month…" Will glances up sharply, "…and now *this*. Oh now please don't be affronted by dear young sir," trills the man on noting that Will's eyebrows have now knitted together, although this

time for an entirely different reason. “No offence intended, I assure you. I’m afraid I have something of a weakness for fine-boned young people with languid eyes and lovely faces.”

“Oh my God,” says Will loudly, “are you *shitting* me?”

“What’s that, dear boy? Am I what?” asks the man in delight, as if Will is being deliberately charming. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar. Is it New World slang?”

“It is,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “Extremely fashionable in certain circles. You ought to try it.” Whereupon Will has to fight a powerful urge to laugh at the idea of various well-bred voices innocently competing over who can devise the most fashionable conjugations of the verb ‘to shit’ (including, but not limited to, ‘to shit oneself,’ ‘to shit them all’ and ‘I shitted him most efficaciously’).

“Upon my word I think I might,” says the man thoughtfully.

Will manages to sober up sufficiently to say “Yes, you really should,” upon which the man coos “Oh that *accent*, it’s *adorable*,” and Will is just contemplating saying something about shit in an adorable way when rescue obligingly presents itself in the form of another braying man (who could almost be a twin brother of the first one as far as width of girth, redness of face, and annoyingness of manner are concerned) and who delivers an eagerly breathless announcement that the Countess of Rosse has just entered the reception room (“this very moment, upon my word!”) and which acts as sufficient incentive for them to both waddle off in pursuit of her. Hannibal rolls his eyes again in a long-suffering way as they leave and Will finally gives into the urge to laugh.

“Who the hell,” he says, “was *that*.”

“The director of the Opera House,” replies Hannibal, “and therefore difficult to avoid entirely.” His dark eyes, tracking the back of the departing figure as it weaves through the crowd, narrow almost imperceptibly then he returns his gaze to Will and his expression softens again. “He is also, as you see, the most appalling bore.” He smiles sardonically but doesn’t add anything else, and Will manages to stop sniggering for long enough to ask whether he’s been shocked into silence via excessive exposure to upper-class bullshit whereupon Hannibal says in a thoughtful voice: “No, I appear to be sulking because I am not as exuberantly pretty as you are,” which promptly sets Will off again.

Hannibal smiles once more, only this time in a more benevolent way, and then suddenly darts out and takes hold of Will’s wrist with a grip that is gentle yet oddly possessive. Will immediately glances up, still bright-eyed and lively, but slowly begins to falter when he realises how intensely Hannibal is staring at him. “What?” he asks, suddenly confused. “What is it?”

Hannibal runs his eyes over Will’s face, poised and unblinking. “Tonight,” he says softly. “Don’t go home Will.”

“Not go home? I don't...Why not?”

Hannibal takes a step closer and then trails a finger across Will's palm in a lingering way that makes Will quiver and then go very still. "Don't go home," repeats Hannibal in the same soft voice. "Come back to Harley Street with me."

A beat of silence follows as they stare at one another; and Will forgets about the surroundings – forgets about the crowds and the noise and the heat and the lateness of the hour – because suddenly nothing else seems relevant or worthy of attention beyond the piercing eyes that are currently boring into his own. He's not really experienced enough to fully appreciate what the offer might mean; but intelligence and native instinct are considerable compensations for lack of worldliness, and he's still fully aware that this is far more than a casual invitation. This is something profound; possibly even hazardous. In that moment, wavering between acceptance and refusal, Will feels a sudden blaze of risk – of raw speculation – as if common sense and self-preservation dictate a natural response that's nevertheless impossible to obey. It's like tempting fate: like someone idling along the edge of a cliff. Someone with their eyes closed and whistling to themselves with their hands in their pockets, believing that they're untouchable, invincible; that they can't ever fall. That other people might miss their footing and plummet down but not Will, because he's not like other people and can't be contained by the same rules. He knows he's falling back into this belief with blind faith, a type of mindless, unquestioning constancy that's both reckless and irresponsible. And yet, and yet...

As he feels Hannibal's grip tighten around his wrist, Will looks up and then nods in silent acquiescence. Because he wants to go, wants to get lost in whatever labyrinthine twists are laid out at the other end; because it's reasonable, and right – and because it's impossible not to.

"Yes," he says quietly. And then, so there can be no possible doubt: "*Yes*."

Hannibal nods too and then, without letting go of Will's wrist, raises his other hand and quickly and deftly strokes a thumb across the top of Will's cheekbone. Then he wordlessly places his palm on Will's shoulder and begins to gently steer him towards the door; and Will, just as wordlessly, allows himself to be led. He stays as close to Hannibal as possible the entire time, aware that he's seeking some kind of reassurance, some sort of ballast; even in the midst of the ultimate awareness that he has no idea what might be just about to happen. And that he should probably care about that…and yet he doesn't.

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In the gathering gloom of the twilight the crowds have begun to spill out of the Opera House and into Covent Garden. The women lift the hems of their dresses out of the mud and straighten their capes and stoles, flitting around in the dusk like birds of paradise in their jewels and feathers while the men adjust their top hats and call out to their coachmen and the horses nod placidly as carriage wheels begin to rock over cobblestones. Small clusters of onlookers gather from afar to observe the spectacle of vicarious wealth and glamour, and some of the bolder ones even dare to insinuate their way into the throng: a young boy in an apron offering umbrellas for sale, a women peddling punnets of roast chestnuts from a little wicker basket, and an elderly man brandishing scrolls of sheet music: "Play the piano do you Ma'am? Sir, do any of your ladies care for singing? Any tune you like to name, I promise I'll have it here." Everyone wants something in exchange for something else, and none of them

notice the couple stood a few feet away and partially obscured behind a pillar. One of them is a tall young man with a knitted cap pulled so far down that his features are partially obscured by the shadow from the peak: the illusion is a rather unnerving one as it makes him appear as if he has only half a face. Next to him is a woman in a pretty bonnet of pale blue felt trimmed with matching ribbons and a print cotton dress of the same shade; obviously dressed in her best and returning from some kind of outing. She appears oblivious to the man's unsettling appearance, and a closer look at the cane she's clutching in her small gloved hand implies that the reason for this is because she's blind.

The woman smiles whimsically, cocking her head towards the swell of well-bred voices and the clatter of carriage wheels and harnesses. "Rich people," she says. "They're nothing to do with us. Come away."

"I recognise that man," says her companion. His voice is oddly flat and emotionless, grinding out from the disembodied mouth like a machine that's trying to approximate natural human speech. "He's been in the papers. Mr Graham. He was sent from America."

"Oh yes, I remember you telling me about it. The detective…Mr Graham the detective. At the opera is he? I wouldn't have thought they were paid enough for that."

"He looks different from his photographs," comes the mechanical reply.

"What does he look like?" She smiles and touches him lightly on the elbow. "Is he handsome like you?"

The man frowns, giving the question proper consideration. "No, I don't think so," he finally replies. "But he seems - purposeful."

"Does he?"

"Yes. He's very purposeful." The monotone voice acquires a brief flicker of animation. "And I know the man he's with."

"You're clever aren't you? You know so much."

"He's a doctor. I know that, because I saw him myself for a short while. A rather strange kind of doctor. Not what I expected."

"I don't trust doctors," says the woman comfortably. "Mostly quacks."

"I don't suppose he'd recognise me. It was a long time ago and I've changed so much since then."

"How?" asks the woman, but there's no immediate reply and eventually she pulls gently on his elbow. "Please," she says. "I'm cold. Let's leave now."

"In a moment. I wonder why they're together?"

"Please," says the woman with a hint of urgency. "You told me you'd take me home after the zoo."

“And I will,” he replies in the same flat voice. The woman briefly bites her lower lip then wraps the shawl a little tighter around her thin shoulders, and the man cranes his neck in order to keep sight of his quarry over the heads of the crowd. When straightened up his physique looks lean and powerful. “They’re talking. Now the doctor is calling a cab. They look as if they’re leaving.” The woman shivers again and he finally glances round. “I beg your pardon, you are very cold aren’t you. Shall I escort you back now?”

“Yes. Please.”

“Would you like to take my arm? You may take my arm if you wish.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“They’re going to leave,” says the man, more to himself than his companion. “They didn’t see me. But it wouldn’t have mattered if they had, they wouldn’t know me. They won’t know me yet. They can’t.”

“Why not?”

The man hesitates, then reaches up and tugs the cap a little further down. “I don’t know if I can tell you,” he says. “Whether it would be *allowed*…” He hesitates again then clears his throat: the resulting noise has a curious quality, somewhat rasping and metallic, and the woman glances round at the sound of it. “I don’t think you could understand,” he adds in a quieter voice.

“Well, you can try me. If you like. I mean, if you wanted.”

The man takes a last glance behind him and then carefully begins to escort the young woman across the detritus of Covent Garden. A few of the lingering opera patrons, still waiting for their carriages and footmen, run their eyes over the eerie distorted shadow that acts as a face and inadvertently draw away. “I don’t think I can tell you,” he repeats, and the woman gives his elbow a small squeeze to show she understands. “It’s not time yet. It’s all part of the process.”

“And what process is that?”

Once again there’s no immediate reply and she chooses not to pursue it, instead tightening her grip on his arm as they navigate a particularly lurching stretch of cobblestones. Beneath her hand she can feel the quilted muscles in his forearm, tense as coils of wire rope.

“It’s a reckoning,” he suddenly says, apropos of nothing. “A transformation. They don’t understand yet. No one understands. But they will.”

“Understand what?” she asks softly. She can’t see, in her blindness, the way the half-face has begun to twitch and grimace; can’t see how the disembodied mouth is gaping open or the glimmer of eyes beneath the shadowy peak of the cap. She can only hear the weird thrill of energy as the mechanical voice grates into animation as it replies: “The process of becoming.”

Chapter End Notes

I always associate George Bernard Shaw with the Victorian era and only discovered shortly prior to posting that Pygmalion premiered much later than this story is set (like, several decades later)…but I'm basically turning into a total hack with the historical accuracy and decided to leave it in anyway.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The return to Harley Street is made with virtually no conversation at all, and for most of the journey the only sound is the rocking of the carriage wheels harmonised by an occasional crack of the driver's whip. The atmosphere feels volatile – crackling and thrumming with an energy that's primed to ignite at the smallest provocation – as Will gazes aimlessly out the window and wonders, with increasing desperation, what exactly he's letting himself in for; and as Hannibal, in turn, watches Will and savours his obvious unease (because beauty in distress is possibly more picturesque than any other kind) while simultaneously wanting to reach out and smooth the discomfort away. *You're so wary aren't you?* he thinks tenderly as Will clears his throat for the fourth time; *so fiercely protective of yourself, even though you have no idea of your true value*. And then, because strained silences don't bother him, he makes absolutely no effort to break it and instead leans back into his seat and meticulously catalogues the way Will's eyes are darting around, the twitching of each finger, and how the glint of small white teeth are appearing at intervals to nibble at his bottom lip. Then he reflects on how someone can be so effortlessly lovely without even being aware of it, while trying not to reproach himself *too* much for a thought that really ought to be beneath him – not because it's unworthy but simply because it's so mundane and obvious – which is imagining what all that lustrous hair is going to look like spread over a pillow. As if lured by the force of the stare, Will finally turns from the window and catches Hannibal's eye; and then looks as if he might like to turn away again but can't quite bring himself to do it – and in the end the remainder of the journey is spent gazing intensely at one another's faces (Will somewhat anguished and nervy; Hannibal quietly yearning and enthralled) until the carriage stops and the driver's voice announces that they've reached their destination.

The hallway, badly lit even in daylight hours, is now pitch black and Will half-expects to see Hannibal's eyes glittering in the darkness like a cat's. Out of habit he heads into the consulting room, then drapes his coat over the chair before taking the uncharacteristic step of asking for a drink. Hannibal smiles faintly, then goes to the crystal decanter on the sideboard and silently provides one; upon which Will drifts over to the window and stands there nursing the glass in both hands while staring pensively at the suffocating swathes of ghost-grey fog. The elegant room, familiar in so many ways, has now taken on a vaguely surreal air; as if it's a simulation of itself, like a scene from a play – as if he could open the door and find the director and stagehands shuffling behind the scenes while the audience take their seats and observe from the back of the room. Some servant or other has built up a fire, so the surroundings are warm but dim; and Hannibal lights the candles in the wall sconces before joining Will by the window. He's standing so close that Will can feel his breath lightly ruffling the back of his neck.

"It's eerie," says Will eventually, gesturing out into the darkness. They're virtually the first words he's spoken since leaving the theatre and his voice feels oddly hoarse from misuse.

“What is?” replies Hannibal, genuinely intrigued (because everything Will thinks or does is invariably fascinating). It scarcely seems possible that he can move any closer and yet he still manages to do so until Will can feel a long, lean strip of warmth that starts at his shoulders and presses against his back and hips. He instinctively feels that it could be unwise to push against it; yet the intensity with which he wants to do so unnerves him, and he swallows audibly and darts his tongue over his lips.

“Knowing that he’s out there somewhere,” he finally manages to say. And this much at least is true, because it’s unsettling in a particularly macabre, creeping way. That somewhere right now, from some boarding house or tenement block, Jack the Ripper might well be gazing out of his own window into the fog, just as Will is; might even be preparing to venture out into it.

“Yes,” says Hannibal softly.

“That they *both* are – the first one and the second.” In the reflection of the window pane Will can see Hannibal’s eyes gleaming behind his shoulder: the way he’s positioned means the black lead frame spans out around his head, making him look as if he has horns or antlers. The illusion’s an unsettling one, and Will shifts his face slightly to lose sight of it.

“There is a lot out there,” Hannibal replies in the same low voice. As Will watches, his reflection reaches round with a fluid, feline movement until his hand is by Will’s face; and Will’s reflection gazes helplessly back with wide eyes and lips that are slightly parted. “Good and bad together, in fact. One cannot exist without the other. And we are *here*, as opposed to *there*, yet still with an intermingling of both.” Very slowly he begins to stroke Will’s jaw with his fingertips as his other hand reaches up to brush through Will’s hair. “Beauty and horror, remember? Another fine line.” Now he’s deliberately using his greater height and strength to hem Will in, and can’t help but be secretly amused (and somewhat touched) by the fact that while Will has no real hope of overpowering him – and must surely know this – he’s still refusing to concede any ground and has set his shoulders into a small, defiant hunch which is rather adorable in its futility. Hannibal smiles to himself and smooths his palm across Will’s back as a reward for being so courageous.

“Yes,” says Will faintly, and then draws in a sharp breath as Hannibal’s other hand shifts downwards and presses lightly against his throat.

“How fast your pulse is Will. Your heart is *pounding*. Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t…I’m not sure.”

“No?”

“Not really,” says Will. He realises his eyes are shut, even though he doesn’t remember closing them.

“Could it be because you’re afraid?” Without even a hint of self-consciousness, Hannibal neatly flicks open the top button of Will’s shirt and slides two fingers beneath the fabric to caress the tip of his collarbone. “But then what are you afraid of; the beauty or the horror? Given how extraordinary you are it is probably both. *So* extraordinary Will; yet so very unaware of it. So young and yet such an old soul. So sophisticated yet so naïve…so much

still to learn." He opens a second button and skims his fingertips a little further down. "Your body's betraying you *mylimasis*," he adds as Will's breath hitches again. And Will wants to deny it but can't, because he isn't entirely sure what it is he's supposed to be in denial about…only that he wants this to stop, yet also hopes that it might never end. He can vividly remember the last time he was like this: stood on Hampstead Heath with a coat enfolded round him and arching up against Hannibal's chest, and how soothing it was; how reassuring. But this doesn't feel anything like that. This feels frightening…it *is* frightening. Because he's never experienced this kind of fierce yearning before and the implicit vulnerability in it seems fraught with danger and pulsating with a constant threat of harm.

"What do you want Will?" Hannibal is now asking. He's still stroking Will's collarbone and the touch, for all its lightness, feels scalding. "Tell me: say it out loud."

Will wants to admit that he doesn't fully know, but is ashamed to, and so opts for muteness instead. Then he helplessly watches the reflection in the window pane as Hannibal's face shifts away so it can press against the back of Will's neck; and for a few seconds Will can feel him smiling against his skin. When Hannibal speaks his voice is even softer and more silken than previously, and he strokes his palms up and down Will's arms in a lingering way before murmuring: "How silent you are Inspector Graham. Do you really have so little to say? Or is it that you require some help; a few alternatives, perhaps? Very well. Would you like to go home? Or maybe sit in these chairs to discuss rules and rubrics and the nature of things? Or perhaps…" He moves his hands to trail across Will's chest and then deftly flicks open a third button, "…perhaps you would like me to take you to bed?"

"We *can't*," says Will, aghast. Even as he's speaking it makes him cringe, because he hates the way it makes him sound – small-minded, provincial – but he's still unable to stop himself, because surely they can't *possibly* do such a thing?

"I'm afraid I must contradict you there," replies Hannibal. He brushes his mouth against the back of Will's neck again. "*Can* is a definitive; it implies capacity. And therefore we *can*, if on no better grounds that simply being functioning adult males in possession of…" At this point Will actually goes pale. Oh God, he thinks, suddenly gripped by a surreal urge to laugh, please don't say the word 'penis' – or any euphemism thereof. If he has to stand by this goddamn window and be informed that he is in possession of a Functioning Adult Male Penis in that clipped aristocratic voice then there is a very real chance of *dying* from mortification.

"In possession of…" continues Hannibal. *Penispenispenis*, *oh my fucking God* "…the right biological imperative," says Hannibal, clearly taking pity on him. No doubt he's blushing now, it must be so obvious; not even the beard is enough to salvage this one. Really, it's no good for fucking anything: he might as well shave the bastard off.

"Yes, I *know*," is all he says.

"What you actually mean, I suppose, is not so much that we *can't*, but that we *shouldn't.* Which is a different matter entirely."

"It's illegal."

“Y-e-s,” says Hannibal, in a tone of voice that clearly implies: ‘How very quaint; and that matters because…?’

“What about your servants?”

“But they are not here. And even if they were are extremely discreet – and rewarded well to be so. There are several things which occur in this house that I have no desire to be broadcast.”

This disclosure corresponds rather unpleasantly with an earlier statement of Hannibal’s about the value of circumspect domestic staff, and Will now has an abrupt and highly unedifying image of himself as just one in a long succession of personable younger men who get invited to (illegally) stay the night. Maybe he’ll meet some of them on the way out tomorrow morning; they could compare notes. “Jack Crawford would *kill* me,” he finally says, a bit desperately.

“That is predicated on him discovering what you have done, which he shall not. And even if he *did* discover it; and even if it *did* drive him to seek violent chastisement against you…” Hannibal smirks slightly, as if to convey the profound ludicrousness of the image, “then I should make it a matter of personal priority and *significant* satisfaction to kill him myself.” This is said with a sardonic little twist of the voice; Will supposes it’s meant to be a joke, although he doesn’t think it’s particularly funny. “So now we have inventoried your reservations,” adds Hannibal, “and as far as I can tell the only one which I would have taken seriously is the only one which I have not heard.”

“What?” says Will, in a voice that’s uncharacteristically thin and strained.

“Why, your own inclination of course. For you to say that the suggestion appals you; that you revolt at the idea of it. And yet you have *not* said that, nor anything close.”

Will’s mouth goes a bit dry. “I did…I…” In the reflection of the window he can see Hannibal beginning to smile. “I meant to.”

“Then say it now.”

There is no response to this so Hannibal leans forward again and gently kisses the side of Will’s throat, making a soothing noise as he feels the latter flinch. “It’s all right Will,” he says softly. “Be calm. I do not wish to hurt you.” And as soon as he’s said this he realises, with something like surprise, that it’s actually true and he doesn’t (or at least not *much*). “The purpose of this isn't pain, after all, but rather pleasure. And you’re so inquisitive; don’t you at least want to know what it feels like? Aren’t you curious? I can show you: ease you in so gently and slowly, then hold you afterwards and let you fall asleep in my arms. And you know I’ll let you go when it's over – release you back into the wild.”

“We can't…we really shouldn’t,” gasps Will, even as he’s closing his eyes and tipping his head back.

“No? And yet you want to so badly don’t you? You know how much you’re going to enjoy it; the reservation is only what you believe you *ought* to feel. Perhaps it would have been better

to not give you any chance to object. What do you think; should I have taken you before we even arrived here? I could have lifted you onto my lap in the carriage, couldn't I – there were so many vibrations from the road, we might have made use of them. I could have held onto your hips and kissed your throat; helped you use the swaying of the cab to find your own rhythm and let you ride me."

"Oh God," says Will in a faint voice.

"No," replies Hannibal sardonically, "just me." Almost torturously slowly he begins to unfasten the rest of Will's shirt, thoughtfully releasing one button after another while brushing his face against Will's with the lightest possible kisses that he deliberately keeps to the jawline in order that Will's mouth can remain undisturbed to continue making its rather enticing gasping sounds. "That's one more thing I want you to learn *mylimasis*: that your desires are defensible. That *you* are defensible; inherently so. Extenuating circumstances, remember?" He pauses and tenderly strokes Will's face before adding softly: "Just like what you did to that ostler."

"No!" says Will, suddenly panicked, "I didn't, I…oh God." He moans helplessly as he feels Hannibal's teeth lightly scraping across his throat, suddenly so unmoored and overwhelmed that Hannibal has to wrap an arm round his chest to help him stay upright. "I *didn't*," he finally manages to say.

"Didn't you?" replies Hannibal caressingly. With his free hand he reaches round to take the glass away from Will and place it on the window ledge. "You're trembling Will. Why is that? Look at you: completely overwhelmed already. So astute and ingenious – so endlessly clever – yet your sharp mind has currently abandoned you, hasn't it? All your autonomy and self-determination…they are of no possible service to you right now. And such a burden most of the time besides; you may as well give them to me. You know you can trust me as a suitable custodian. Then you won't have to do anything at all, will you? All you'll have to do is let go."

"For God's sake," says Will through gritted teeth, thoroughly resenting the implications of this. "You can't *possibly* be serious."

"And – there you are," replies Hannibal, and Will groans internally at the realisation that he's stumbled straight into the verbal mantrap that's been set for him. "It's not just anxiety is it?" adds Hannibal caressingly. "No, you're *angry* with me. Aren't you Will? You resent the fact I can make you feel like this. Your beautiful, self-destructive disposition: you both desire *and* require. Sense and intellect say no, but you disregard them anyway and pursue your own course. Plunging ahead…losing yourself in your own labyrinth." He begins sucking a bruise into Will's neck, taking his time as if savouring every sensation, and Will moans again and finally gives into the urge to arch backwards against Hannibal's chest. "It really is incredibly fascinating to see you do it. Why do you fight so hard? Always so defiant and rebellious, even when it's contrary to your own interests."

"Oh God, just shut up," hisses Will, despite the fact he's letting his head fall back onto Hannibal's shoulder, exposing the long line of his throat to provide better access for the painfully bruising kisses. "Just for once, can't you? Just…just *stop*."

“But do you *really* want me to stop?” murmurs Hannibal; and then, when there’s no reply: “Turn round Will.”

“No.”

“How disobedient you are *mylimasis*.”

“Make me.”

“But I don’t need to make you. You are going to do it all by yourself.”

“Confident, aren’t you?”

“In you; most certainly. I am confident you are going to learn to obey your instincts – to indulge them, even – and therefore make the right decision. Besides I can wait, Will. I can wait for as long as necessary. I have already been waiting a very long time – I was waiting for you before I even met you; before I knew such a person as Will Graham even existed. I would have waited a lifetime, and if the wait proved fatal then I would have made sure I found you in the next life and waited for you there.” He places another kiss on the back of Will’s neck, just beneath his hair, before adding in a quiet voice: “Echoes through time, Will. Some things are worth waiting for.”

Will frowns now and shakes his head impatiently, confused as to how these words – beautifully beguiling as they are – can possibly be in earnest. Because how *can* they be…it doesn’t make any sense. His only knowledge of seduction comes from plays and novels (where it is always, *always* enacted between a man and a woman, one upon the other) but he still has no doubt that this is exactly what’s happening now. He’s being *seduced* – expertly and charismatically – but surely with no more ardency or sincerity than an author of one of those plays or novels, sat at a desk and chewing his pen while carefully selecting each word for maximum effect before yawning and tossing the pen aside to begin afresh on some more interesting task. And yet he longs to believe it so badly: that’s the worst part. *I want you,* he thinks desperately, *I NEED you; and it scares me because you clearly don’t need anybody and it’s not possible that you could want me in the same way*. And for all the latter’s sensuality and insouciance, he knows that Hannibal is not going to coerce him into anything: he’s going to wait, patiently and plausibly, and let Will come to him. The choice is obviously Will’s to make: all the choice, all the control and – more to the point – all the consequences that come with it. “Oh God,” says Will quietly. He takes a rather shuddering breath and then screws his eyes closed; poised on the edge of the precipice and ready to fall.

For a few more seconds neither of them speaks, and Will grows absurdly aware of numerous tiny background noises: the crackling of the fire, the ticking of the ormolu clock, the rhythmic sound of Hannibal breathing, and most of all his own heartbeat pounding frantically in his ears. *The whole room drew its breath*. Isn’t that an expression…he’s sure he's read it somewhere. Then he remembers his earlier sense of being on a stage, and can almost imagine he can hear the audience – the faint rustling of fans and clearing of throats as a host of silent spectators wait to see what he’s going to do. He’s gripping onto the window ledge now, holding on so tightly his knuckles are turning white; he can see them every time he glances down, gleaming in the gloom like little pearly death heads.

“How courageous you are Will,” says Hannibal finally, once again skimming his lips against the back of Will’s neck because he likes the way it makes him quiver. “See how wary and unsure you are – yet here you stand. Fearlessness might be a gift of nature and temperament; but *true* courage is not the absence of fear, but rather feeling afraid and persevering regardless.” Now he wraps both arms round Will and pulls him close before adding in a softer voice: “Fear is not a reason to cease and desist; it is the inspiration to strike out. And you have the most exquisite grace under pressure.”

Will closes his eyes again. “Have I though?” he says sardonically.

“Of course you have: native, natural grace. And beauty. And darkness. You conceal it so well don’t you, Will Graham…but you know that I can still see you.”

And at the sound of the words Will makes a small moaning noise because, oh God, it’s *this*; it’s this more than anything else. It’s the idea of being really seen*;* the fact that all the internal chaos, confusion and twisted straggling despair has been perceived and acknowledged, and that Hannibal understands all of it and – at least for tonight, at least in this moment – still desires him anyway. It’s recognition and resonance, it’s witness bearing; it’s a testimony, it’s something solemn and sincere and *real*…and it means that there’s no help for it anymore – no help at all – and Will snaps open his eyes then abruptly lets go of the ledge and swings round so he can crush his face against Hannibal’s: meeting in a hungry, passionate clash of lips, tongues, and warm breath as he moans into Hannibal’s mouth, and Hannibal folds his arms round Will’s back and makes a low growling noise deep in his throat before tugging Will’s head down by the hair, both of them completely synchronised in the same mutual, craving urgency. To Will the surge of chemistry is breathtaking – extreme and indisputable – and utterly overwhelming because of it. It’s like *voltage*. Like something fierce and living, like a third person in the room; and it reminds him of an exhibition in the States by an electrical engineer, proudly demonstrating the new principle of cross currents to a sceptical audience. The lights in the auditorium were dimmed, and then in the centre of the stage a series of coloured flares began to lick around inside a glass dome. “The Tesla coil,” said the lecturer proudly and everyone had gasped, even Will had gasped, because it had seemed inconceivable at the time…yet isn’t this even more so? It’s like being pillaged – ravaged – and he’s acutely aware of the barely contained ferociousness that underlies the way Hannibal is touching him: desire and craving, with the promise of savagery only *just* concealed below the surface. There’s a frantic white-hot ruthlessness to the whole thing, and it’s malicious yet delicious, and thrilling and terrifying; but even then the fear isn't enough to make him want to stop. He’s helplessly aware of how he’s arching his entire body against Hannibal’s, feverishly clinging onto the latter’s shoulders and writhing in his arms; and when they pull apart for a few seconds to draw breath, Will can hear himself gasping “Oh yes…*yes*,” in a frantic, urgent voice that he doesn’t entirely recognise before their mouths crash together again and Will can taste a faint coppery tang from where his lip has caught against Hannibal’s teeth. His arms are being twisted behind his back now, roughly pinned in place by the wrist, and he wants to care about that but can’t because, oh God, he’s *dying* for it – desperate and derailed by desire – even though it’s unnerving because it’s so intense. Too primal; too *primitive*: the kind of mindless longing that must propel animals into a state of heat whereby sense and reason are disregarded then distilled into an insatiable survivalist urgency to be claimed, consumed and owned. Enslaved to physical instinct…And the realisation of this is so unsettling that it

makes him struggle against it, starting to panic again and question what the fucking hell he thinks he's doing.

But then Hannibal is lifting him up, and Will is gasping and wrapping his legs around Hannibal's waist and grinding against him as they spin round and Will's back crashes against the wall (his head cradled by Hannibal's hand to protect it from the impact) and there's the unmistakable sound of something falling, and glass breaking, and Will himself feels like he might be about to shatter and that each fragment would catch the light on the way down. They stay like that for a while as the kiss grows gentler and less frenzied, with Will completely unaware that the distressed sounds he'd begun to make were the only thing capable of forcing Hannibal to recollect himself and reassert a measure of restraint and self-control. And then Will's being carried towards the staircase, and then up it (aware that at some point most of his clothes appear to have been torn off and not entirely sure when it happened); and a small, frightened part of himself wants it to stop – wants to run out into the night, all the way back to the comforting, drab familiarity of his own room where such unsettling, seismic things can't happen. Where he's not going to feel so heady and besieged, or so vulnerable and exposed; and where it's silent and solitary but safe in spite of it, because if you don't give yourself up to someone then at least there's no one to take you away from yourself; and that fucking stupid quote keeps going through his head: *screw your courage to the sticking place*. On the landing Hannibal puts him down without breaking the kiss and Will can't help feeling that it's very deliberately done – as if it's necessary for him to demonstrate responsibility for the decision by walking into the bedroom himself – and he falters slightly then sways against a wooden cabinet with an impact that briefly knocks their mouths apart. And if there's going to be a time to say "No" then surely this would be it, but…oh God.

Once inside Hannibal's room Will grows visibly nervous, as if the sight of the bed has reinforced that yes, this is really going to happen; and while his hasty attempt at self-possession is convincing enough to persuade a lot of people – perhaps even most people – Hannibal is not deceived for one moment and can immediately tell that Will is feeling wary and uncertain (and likewise trying desperately not to show it), so gently lays him down on the bed and strokes his face to try and settle and soothe him into calmness. The strategy is instantly effective and Will sighs happily, obviously unused to being the subject of such tender and highly focussed regard, as Hannibal brushes his lips against his forehead and then cradles him in his arms so he can inspect his prize in loving detail. The delicate bones and willowy limbs have something of the medieval frescos about them – exquisite pain and divine suffering – but then his coils of hair and large luminous eyes are pure pre-Raphaelite and belong to the more enticing, sensuous spheres of bliss and decadence. *Art for art's sake*, thinks Hannibal reverently, tracing a finger over Will's collarbone. In fact he's totally motionless now, eyes closed and long feathery eyelashes sweeping down his cheeks, although whether it's tranquillity or overwhelm that's causing it is hard to say. But so pale and still he might almost be asleep. The sleep from which one never wakes…he might almost be dead; a serenely lifeless object of devotion, just like Millais' *Ophelia*. And Hannibal frowns at the thought of it then leans forward and tenderly kisses Will to wake him up – to gently breath the life back into him – and Will makes a soft gasping noise and murmurs "*Hannibal*" then reaches out a hand which Hannibal takes hold of so he can entwine their fingers together; pressing light kisses against Will's forehead and eyelids, calling him "*Dearest*" and "*My darling*," telling him how beautiful he is, how wanted, and how good it's going to feel. It's rather like trying to win the confidence of something small, wild and wary – at which point

Will suspects he's being humoured and grows irritable and offended; so Hannibal just smiles and kisses him again, even more gently than before, while mentally surveying and appraising the various options for how best to proceed.

In this respect – and as deeply frustrating as it might be – actual sex seems out of the question: ill-advised on the one hand, and impractical on the other. The latter because there's nothing suitably emollient to hand (he makes a mental note to go to a pharmacy at the earliest opportunity to rectify this) and Will is obviously not experienced enough to know how to sufficiently relax his body without it. Yet while Will is far too rare and lovely to despoil with something convenient yet foully domestic like lamp oil, Hannibal is also extremely unwilling to hurt this most precious of lovers by taking him dry. The former, which is probably even more to the point, is that beneath the well-constructed façade Will is clearly terrified which means a level of restraint is in order for this first time. Nor does Hannibal have any qualms in conceding that such consideration is not entirely (or even mostly) for Will's sole benefit, so much as it is a manoeuvre within a larger tactical strategy for the two of them. Specifically that if Will's left unsettled or overwhelmed beyond the point of actual pleasure then he's hardly going to be keen to repeat the experience...and which would not be at all compatible with Hannibal's ambition of bringing Will into his bed on a regular and longterm basis. So while he'd admittedly like nothing more than to drape this beautiful, nervy being across the counterpane, cover his body with his own and then fuck him into senseless abandonment, he determines to resist tonight on the grounds that it would almost certainly be too much and might even scare Will off permanently. And while fear, endurance and extremity may have their rightful place (as with so much else) that time and place is not...now.

All of this is decided upon with extreme speed and in meditative silence – and naturally does not involve consulting Will's judgement in any way about what he thinks he might need or prefer. Hannibal, on the other hand, knows all about the pleasures of delayed gratification, as well as having turned self-restraint (at least when in the service of self-interest) into a positive art form. So now he leans in again and kisses Will, slow and soft, and murmurs "You look so beautiful," before gently smoothing Will's hair out of his eyes – battling the urge to call him '*little one*' the entire time on the basis of how young and vulnerable he currently looks, but demurring on the grounds of the spectacular outrage such a statement would inevitably provoke (and then smiling affectionately at the thought of it). Will, in turn, is now gazing up with a vaguely troubled 'what are you going to do to me *now?'* expression on his face; and the combination of defencelessness and invitation elicits something in Hannibal which he knows, for Will's sake, it is extremely important that he suppress.

"Come up here to me *mylimasis*," he says instead; and, because Will's face is turned away, Hannibal therefore misses the slight frown at the sound of this foreign word which Will is starting to suspect must be something bordering on uncomplimentary – possibly a private joke of some kind – due to the repeated refusal to say it English. But he still allows Hannibal to gently coax him upright until he's kneeling with his back against Hannibal's chest and his head sweetly tucked beneath his shoulder. And in turn, Hannibal wraps him up in a possessive hold which is impossible for Will to escape from even if he wanted to (which admittedly he doesn't) and kisses his throat; marvelling at how pliant Will, for once, is allowing himself to be.

“I don't want you to think or do right now, Will,” he says in the same soft tone, “but only *feel* and *be*. I don't want you to do anything except put yourself in my hands and allow me to take care of you.” The irritated huffing noise this evokes immediately suggests that Will is preparing to rebel at anything which could be construed as condescension – despite the fact it’s true and he does need someone to take of him; is *aching* for it, in fact – so Hannibal gently presses his fingers over Will’s mouth to stem the inevitable objection and trails his other hand up and down Will’s torso. The touch is exploratory yet worshipful, paying careful attention to each plane of bone and curve of muscle, and the way his hand dips lower each time makes Will shiver and arch up against Hannibal’s chest while unwittingly letting his legs fall further apart. Hannibal’s other hand is still partially covering his mouth, and the fact he’s allowing this implies a level of trustfulness which – although, objectively speaking, is extremely ill-advised – strikes Hannibal in that moment as almost unbearably touching. Human bodies are so frail and delicate, so apt to rend and tear…there’s a certain savage grace to it; how swiftly, simply and beautifully they can be breached and broken apart. And there’s no doubt that Will understands this – almost as well as Hannibal himself. It brings with it an undeniable sense of ownership, but also of obligation: that Will is his possession to influence, control and manoeuvre; but also his responsibility to cultivate, protect and take care of. Just…*his*. Then he gathers Will closer against him, pressing his lips against his forehead with a powerful surge of protective tenderness, and Will gives a small contented sigh and leans appreciatively into the touch. Hannibal, in turn, finds himself captivated by the way Will appears primed to respond so rapturously to even the slightest contact. In fact the contrast is rather irresistible: a flawless arrangement of artless naiveté tempered by utter dissolution and shamelessness – and all the more perfect because it's so obviously unconsciously done.

“I want you on your hands and knees for me,” murmurs Hannibal, straight into Will’s ear. “Would you do that?” He’s well aware of how striking his voice can seem to native English speakers (and has always exploited this to full effect) so does it now by deliberately rolling the vowels and adding a smoky inflection to the timbre that’s not usually there. And Will flushes rather beautifully but immediately complies in a way that, despite his overwrought state, is still surprisingly graceful. Hannibal sighs with admiration and reverently strokes his palms over Will’s back and along his ribs. “Just stay like this for a few moments,” he adds. “I would like to look at you – you are so lovely.” Will makes a breathy gasping noise and Hannibal trails his hands downward and strokes along Will’s slim legs, which are already beginning to quiver. “I’m afraid I’m denying myself now,” he adds with genuine regret, “because I would have liked to watch your face while I’m doing this to you. But until you've grown more used to it…” he leaves a suggestive pause as an implication that before many more nights have passed Will is going to be a positive *veteran* of it, “…I think it would be more comfortable for you like this. And if I can’t see you then at least I am still able to hear you.” Will gasps again and Hannibal can’t resist leaning over and running his teeth across his shoulder blades. “Good boy,” he says, soft yet intense. “Listen to you: so excited already. Now spread yourself open for me; move your legs further apart. No – wider. Just like that; that’s perfect. Show off this beautiful body.”

I can’t believe I’m doing this, thinks Will frantically; and then flinches because he’s not quite certain whether he’s said it aloud. It’s true though – he can’t. How *can* he be doing this? How it is even possible…how can he be kneeling completely naked on the bed of another man (who’s also naked) and be feeling so vulnerable and desperate, and so dazzled and so overpowered, flushed yet shivering, trembling with strain while kinetic with need…and so

very unwilling to stop even though he knows he probably should. He has a brief, surreal image of himself from this morning: getting dressed as usual, saying hello to Margot on the way to the kitchen, the way he couldn't find his glasses and Mrs Bloom locating them by the fender, and her smiling and then…oh *God*, it's like a different lifetime ago. Then he wonders what that version of himself would say if they could see him now, and whether they'd be impressed at his boldness, or horrified at his shamelessness…or indeed, whether that person even really *exists* anymore; because surely they can't survive tonight. And isn't that another impossibility; that he can ever be the same after this? That he would even want to be? Everything's shifted now, *everything.*

And in that moment Will finally understands – and Christ, how could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so *blind*? – and his eyes snap open as he gasps with the crushing force of the realisation, because…*Oh God I've fallen in love with you*, he wants to scream out at Hannibal; and it would *need* to be screamed – something raw and desperate – not whispered coyly but ripped, flayed and dripping, from out of the very core of himself. He makes a slight whining noise, biting his lip so hard he can taste blood. *I've being doing it the entire time haven't I?* he thinks desperately. *Falling and fallen. I didn't even have a choice. Oh God oh God, I love you…but I don't want to because the way you make me feel is overpowering. You frighten me and I'm frightening myself. I want to know you but I don't know how. I want to feel sure. I want too much. I just want you. What have you done to me? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*

"Oh God…*fuck*," says Will out loud. The muscles in his arms are clamped so tight they're starting to hurt, and there's a temptation to simply allow them to give way and sink his face against the mattress except for the knowledge that such a position would feel too submissive and therefore humiliating. And Hannibal was right, Will really is being betrayed by his body because he's very possibly harder than he's ever been in his life, wet and aching and vaguely self-conscious over how he can feel himself leaking pre-come onto the expensive bedclothes. Or no, maybe it's not betrayal. Maybe it's more like complicity*,* on the grounds that he's so unable to process the enormity of the recent revelation that he's frantic to take refuge in the physical as somewhere to hide from what's happening in his head. He doesn't want to have to face what it means, it's too much; he can't do it, even though he knows he's going to have to. But not yet, *not yet.* "Please," he can hear himself saying; and he sounds angry and agonised yet so hopeful and yearning, all at the same time. "Please, *please.*"

Hannibal, who is by now so attuned to Will's moods and responses that he'd intuited Will's desperation even before Will, now makes a pleased sound at how *incredibly* aroused the latter obviously is, then reaches down and languorously swirls his fingers over the head of Will's cock – which elicits a frantic wailing noise – before running them along Will's lips as an invitation to open his mouth. He's actually expecting Will to refuse and is surprised yet delighted at the way he sucks on Hannibal's fingers almost ecstatically, moaning slightly when he realises he can taste himself. Hannibal strokes Will's jaw with his thumb while he's doing it and reflects on what a sensuous nature the latter clearly has – obviously repressed until now. It's enormously satisfying that Hannibal is going to be the one to cultivate it; not least because the idea of *his* Will being in hands that are any less adoring or competent than his own (or indeed, any other hands at all) is completely intolerable. He nearly snarls at the thought of it then leans over again and places a rough possessive kiss on the back of Will's neck before, somewhat regretfully, removing his hand and pulling away in order to reposition

himself further down the bed. And Will, who doesn't want Hannibal to go, makes an endearingly mournful noise at the sudden loss of contact then fidgets around in strained, trembling anticipation before going completely rigid and announcing in a rather scandalised tone of voice: “You shouldn't touch me there.”

“No? You think not?”

“Honestly, you really shouldn't. Or there. Or...oh God. Oh my God. Definitely not *there*.”

Hannibal smiles affectionately to himself, then strokes Will’s back to calm him down before saying: “On the contrary.”

“No, but you…”

“Hush *mylimasis*. You’re going to like this, I promise.”

“I…don’t…think…you should,” replies Will faintly, but far less convincingly; then screws his eyes shut again and quivers as Hannibal spits neatly onto his hole (adding “F-u-c-k,” because he’s embarrassed by how intensely arousing he finds this to be); then he’s being caressed once more – the warm tips of Hannibal’s fingers moving back and forwards in delicate strokes – and is embarrassed all over again by the way he can feel the tightness of the muscle eagerly yielding to such gentle yet firmly persistent exploration. Then Hannibal is murmuring “Oh *yes*, that's it; that’s perfect,” and spitting onto him *again* (oh God) to keep everything wet and soft. “Let me see how ready you are,” adds Hannibal; and then Will is groaning loudly as he feels a broad thumb slide deep inside him, slippery and slick-smooth, before withdrawing entirely and being replaced by a finger, and then two, which rub in exquisitely deliberate circles. The stretch is almost, but not quite, painful and he can feel his entire body clench at the intrusion as he desperately claws the bed covers and fights to cling onto some semblance of self-control.

“Oh *God*, it feels so good,” says Will. He sounds slightly shocked, almost panicked. “*Oh*, I like that, I like it.”

“I know you do my darling, I can tell.” Hannibal begins to move his hand a little faster and this time Will makes a helpless keening noise and arches his back. “Good boy, that’s perfect. Look at you. You enjoy it so much don’t you – the feel of someone’s fingers inside you.”

“It’s…it’s…oh – *oh*. Please don’t stop…*Please*.”

“I shall not stop. You are taking it so beautifully.” He withdraws nearly all the way and lingers a few seconds before pushing back in – pushing in deep – and Will groans loudly and thrusts his hips against the long slide of Hannibal’s fingers. “That’s it,” says Hannibal softly. “*Very* good. Can you feel that? How little resistance there is – the way you’re opening up for me?” Will just gasps instead of replying, and Hannibal feels slightly speechless himself at the fact that while Will’s mercurial moods and acerbic temperament make him undeniably hard work in the capacity of friend or colleague, in the role of a lover he’s actually completely perfect. In fact if he’s responding like this so *very* early on…Hannibal’s mind briefly mists over with the possibilities (Will knelt on the edge of the bed with his legs spread wide apart; Will bent over the desk in the consulting room, or up against the wall, or even the ladder,

before being pulled onto Hannibal's lap so he can ride him; spine curved gracefully and head thrown back while clinging onto Hannibal's shoulders to stay upright). Then he smiles to himself and strokes Will's leg with his free hand before leaning down and slowly swirling his tongue around the tight, stretched skin where his fingers are buried deep inside Will's body; at which point Will makes a helping gasping sound as his arms finally do give way and he pitches forward until he's resting on his elbows with his face his pressed crushed against the bed.

"Oh God," says Will frantically; and then once he's started finds that he can't stop himself and keeps repeating it in an increasingly helpless chant (*oh God-oh God-oh my God-ohhhh*) because it feels so incredibly shameful and pleasurable and almost unbearably intimate: how he's being sucked and lapped at as if he's something delectable; the way the touch is alternating between languorous flat strokes and more deliberate spearing thrusts; and how Hannibal's hands are running up and down his thighs and forcing his legs wide open, then licking past the tight ring of muscle until Will is so wet – so very wet; soaking in fact, wet *everywhere* – and now he's being fingered open again, and is powerless to stop himself rocking backwards to try and get more. And now "Oh *fuck*…God, oh my *God*," gasps Will; then cries out and goes totally rigid as a deep ripple of pleasure runs through his entire body at the exact moment Hannibal begins to slowly work his tongue inside him.

Hannibal makes an amused sound before eventually pulling away and kissing Will's back. "I don't suppose anyone ever told you about that, did they?" he says; but Will is now too far gone to reply. So Hannibal knocks his legs apart again with one hand (rather more roughly than necessary and not for any real purpose beyond wanting to see Will look as vulnerable and as debauched as possible) and slips two fingers back inside him with the other, sighing with satisfaction at how easily they glide in. His boy feels so luscious now…so *ready;* sweet and slick and almost unfeasibly responsive – sufficiently flushed and fervid that if a mirror were held above his body it would surely mist over as if touched by warm breath. For a few more moments he continues to rock his hand between Will's legs but gradually slows the movement and then stops entirely, instead allowing Will to set his own pace and move how he wants to. He looks achingly beautiful like this: head drooping between his shoulders like a young martyr, all muscles swaying and flexing, and the way the sheen of perspiration makes his pale skin glow like ivory in the firelight. He's extremely close now – Hannibal can tell from the way his body is quivering and tightening, preparing itself for orgasm – and with his fingers buried so deep inside, right to the knuckle, he can feel every single tremor and clench. It's as if Will's trying to grip onto him; and in turn the feeling of *that* leads to the inevitable awareness of how those muscles would feel tightening onto his cock if it were sunk deep inside Will's beautiful body and Will was about to come round it; and the idea is so intoxicating it requires every shred of his iron self-control not to simply spread Will wide open with both hands and fuck him into the mattress then and there. Instead he watches, with an entirely unfamiliar sense of tenderness, as Will gasps and rocks his hips backwards. *There you go my little darling*, he thinks, *you're so close now aren't you? So much pleasure; and so overwhelmed by it. You can't quite understand how it can possibly feel so good.*

Now he's also faced with a dilemma, because he knows that at this point a conscientious lover would be reaching round to stroke Will's incredibly lovely and shamefully neglected cock and bring him off that way – but there's almost no doubt that Will is so helplessly aroused (and *perfectly* sensitised) that the right amount of stimulation is going to be enough

to make him come from simply fucking himself on Hannibal's fingers. And that by logical extension he could just as easily come from having Hannibal's cock inside him and fucking himself on that – and the idea of it is far too perfect to alter in any way. So Hannibal opts for selfishness instead and places his palm on the small of Will's back to tilt his hips further down and provide a bit more leverage then begins to thrust his fingers upwards as Will pivots downwards, rubbing the tips of his fingers against his prostate and sighing with pleasure at the sound of the resulting moan; the way it makes Will writhe against the touch as his voice goes high and young. He smooths his free hand across Will's back, relishing how soft the skin feels, then reaches upwards to tangle his fingers in his hair (tugging very gently), before skimming his hand back down again: stroking Will's neck, his shoulder blades, the dips and curves of his spine. Despite the somewhat frail façade, it's pleasing to feel how strong and wiry Will actually is – the muscles firm and well-defined for all the pale slimness and slender softness of the exterior – and he reaches in front to caress his chest, completely unable to prevent the low gasping noise he makes himself at the way he can feel Will's nipples stiffen beneath his fingertips. Then he allows his hand to wander upwards again and takes firm hold of Will's shoulder so he can tug him backwards onto his fingers in perfect rhythm with each thrust. Will gives a fraught, breathy moan and bucks his hips, clearly frantic to take it as deep as possible, and Hannibal sighs in helpless admiration.

"You are completely perfect like this," he says with rare sincerity. "So beautiful. So responsive."

"Oh God, Hannibal..." Will's voice sounds raw, catching in the back of his throat as his body gives another desperate shudder. "*Oh*. I'm going to…I'm…I…"

"Good boy," says Hannibal gently. "That's perfect; it's exactly what you're supposed to do." Now he's changed his mind again and has opted to abandon self-interest (at least temporarily) in favour of prioritising Will's preferences. In this regard he suspects he may find it increasingly difficult to say 'no' to Will for anything – and how inconvenient such a stance might be – but for the moment ignores it and begins to slowly trail his hand down Will's torso. Moves it to his waist, then strokes over the hollow of his hip (noting with pleasure how sweetly and snugly the small curve of bone slots into his palm as he curls his fingers round it). Lingers for a few more teasing seconds. Moves his hand lower. Will realises what's about to happen and makes a lovely, fretful noise deep in his throat and Hannibal smiles at the sound of it as he takes hold of Will's cock, which is hot and heavy and beautifully slick-smooth, and then begins to stroke it to match the movement of his fingers.

"So perfect, Will," he repeats quietly. "I wish you could see yourself now." He crooks his fingers upwards within the tight, smooth heat of Will's body, expertly exploring and caressing, before pressing down hard on the rim with his thumb at exactly the same time; at which point Will gives a long, low moan as a visible tremor runs right through him. "Oh *yes*," says Hannibal reverently. "My beautiful boy. There you go; that's it now isn't it?" And Will promptly tenses, quivers, goes rigid, and then gasps Hannibal's name as his hips give a final frantic jolt and he starts to come.

It seems to last for a while and Will cries out over and over again as each wave hits, as if his small body can't quite manage the intensity of coming so hard and for so long; and Hannibal vows to himself that next time he'll ensure that Will is wrapped in his arms so he can hold

him through it. Nevertheless he doesn't think he's ever seen anything quite so exquisite in his entire life and without even fully realising what he's doing he wraps his hand round Will's neck and roughly pushes him forward, pinning him in place so he can lean over the expanse of perfect white skin and, with a few quick strokes (because really that's sufficient – it's *more* than sufficient) comes all over Will's back in a series of hot, wet pulses. Will moans again at the sensation and Hannibal lets out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding before kissing him between the shoulder blades.

"Forgive me my darling," he murmurs into his skin, "that was unpardonably rude of me. I am afraid the sight of you exceeds my self-control."

Will makes a sound that seems partly amused and partly frantic (no doubt because the whole topic of self-control is a rather sensitive one right now) then slumps down onto the bed; trembling so badly that Hannibal's medical instincts can't help but be alerted to it – and would probably be somewhat troubled if he wasn't astute enough to realise it's largely emotional overwhelm that's responsible rather than physical indisposition. He reaches over to retrieve a handkerchief from the bedside table and tenderly cleans up Will's back, then strokes his damp hair out of his eyes (completely unable to resist twirling the same curl round and round his index finger as he does so); and only then begins to muse over why Will is being so uncharacteristically quiet. Exhausted, perhaps? Or, more likely, he's begun to feel self-conscious. Hannibal, to whom such sensations as embarrassment and discomfiture are completely foreign, can't imagine what Will must be experiencing in any meaningful way although he can create it on an intellectual level; and subsequently decides that a degree of space might be required to allow Will to try and compose himself. Considering, in turn, that he fully intends to recommence dismantling Will as soon as possible then the poor boy should probably be permitted a measure of reprieve while it's still available. So Hannibal pulls away to the other side of the bed, and as he does so completely misses the brief look of anguish that flits across Will's face at the sensation of being abandoned. Then a stretch of silence follows in which Hannibal gazes complacently at the canvas of Will's back like someone admiring a newly acquired artwork: frowning over slim white scars and the altercations they must represent; noting the cluster of curls that feather over the top of his neck and cataloguing the faint dusting of freckles, like constellations of tiny stars, before meticulously inspecting the curve and lift of each separate vertebrae...and all the time completely unaware that Will is staring helplessly into the flickering half-light of the fire and battling against a plunge of shocked unhappiness that's so overpowering it makes him want throw his head back and scream.

In an attempt to calm himself Will takes some slow, measured breaths and counts to ten (which doesn't work); so then tries to appeal to logic where sensation has failed and methodically unravel where the sudden surge of gloom has come from. *What's the matter with you?* he thinks, attempting rationality; but it's hard to say because, oh God, fuck, it's *everything*: temporarily suppressed in the fevered ecstasy of the past half hour and now trooping back into consciousness in a battalion of sorrows that seem to have doubled in potency on the basis of a short-lived abeyance. It's the pain in his head, it's Freddy Lounds, it's the dead ostler, it's the uncertainty of what he's done and who he is, and what it means, and why it matters. It's that man at the opera emphasising that Will is just one in a long succession of "enchanting company." It's the fact that "*There are several things which occur in this house which I have no desire to be broadcast,*" and "*It is extremely convenient to have*

employees who will act in one's interests and only observe what you tell them to" and which Will is now convinced refers to a string of illicit lovers; and how he needed to believe he could be more than that, but doesn't even know how to begin expressing such a wish, even if he wasn't terrified of the mocking rejection it would inevitably provoke. It's the fact that while he can hardly complain about the level of attention he's received, at no point did Hannibal indicate any interest in actually fucking him (which Will wants to refer to as 'making love,' but can't) – as if the whole idea of that degree of intimacy was somehow distasteful, and that perhaps Hannibal would only do that with a woman, or more distressingly (far more) with a man who's more valued, or more appealing or…Will doesn't even know; basically just any man that's not him. It's the fact that a liaison which almost certainly means very little to Hannibal means an awful lot more to Will, and that the sense of dependency and helpless, hopeless yearning is frightening and all-consuming and he doesn't know how to exorcise it. And it's a sense of shame and humiliation – of self-loathing – that's so intense it's almost physically painful. The idea of himself, on his hands and knees like that, completely out of control. The fact that his first experience of sex has not been with a woman but with another man – a man to whom Will is just one in a line of many disposable liaisons – and that nothing is ever going to be able to change that, *ever*. And the idea of what people would say if they knew. His father. Jack. The men at the station, oh *God*. The scorn and sneers and disgust. And the fact that he cares so much: he, who *never* cares what people think of him. And yet he cares about this, and he hates himself for it, and therefore he hates *it* too. He hates what he just did. And most of all he hates the fact that all this has been in the service of being reckless and unguarded enough to fall in love with someone who's not only entirely unsuitable, but utterly misplaced to love him in return.

Love and hate…one extreme to the other. People say that love is the most natural thing in the world. They do say that, don't they? As if it's like breathing, or rain, or the turn of the tides; as if it's something only the flawed and unnatural can't accomplish successfully. *Two loves I have of comfort and despair*. He remembers that from English class: Shakespeare's sonnets. All those teenage boys, as raw-boned as rocking horses and sprawling about in their chairs while rolling their eyes at the teacher's commentary: because love was the type of thing you only expressed for your mother (even though Will didn't have a mother), and girls were coldly coy and aloof – and largely inaccessible anyway – so how could something as dull and derisive as love possibly be a cause of despair? Love, in those days, smelt like stale lavender water; it was lace-like and demure with modest reserve and drawing room diffidence. Now it's raw and rough and grimy, agonising in its detail, and spiky with rejection and wretched self-knowledge; now it's something unrequited and coldly glittering as a diamond; something you can cut your hands on when you try to grasp it. Something that scars. Then he shifts his face so he can glance over at Hannibal, who's staring back with one of his typical inscrutable expressions, and he wants to whisper: 'I've fallen in love with you; why did you let me do that? Why didn't you *stop* me?'

Any one of these things would have been dismal enough by itself, but combined together they create a pitch of feeling that's virtually unbearable; and through a level of application that feels truly heroic, Will manages to remain in control and distil all the confused, frustrated unhappiness into only three words: "I should go."

For a few fleeting seconds Hannibal actually looks surprised, but recovers himself almost immediately and says "Not at all," in a leisurely voice before adding: "You are perfectly

welcome to stay here tonight."

"No…no, I should leave," mutters Will into the pillow. Oh God, now he has to face the humiliating task of retrieving his clothes (currently strewn all the way up the stairs and across the bedroom floor, like a trail of breadcrumbs leading…where?). And Hannibal, in one of his rare failures of insight, sees how unhappy and wary Will looks and sadly misinterprets it; assuming that any further contact would be unwelcome, and therefore resisting his initial impulse, which is to pull this beautiful damaged being close towards him and stroke his face and refuse to relinquish him again. Instead he moves away to give Will some privacy and Will wants to fling his arms round him and beg him not to go (and then feels disgusted with himself for being so pitiful) so practically dives onto his clothes and puts his shirt on inside out because he's so frantic to get dressed, get composed, and then get the hell out. He can't help feeling that his presence must be a colossal irritant to Hannibal who, despite appearing as scrupulously polite as always, would scarcely be human if he didn't find such overwrought neediness distasteful; and Will is currently finding himself unbearable so has no real reason to assume that Hannibal won't feel the same. No doubt the assorted other conquests conduct themselves far more decorously…oh God, fuck those bastards – fuck all of them.

After checking over his shoulder that he's not being observed, Will actually runs down the stairs in what's now become a maddened haste to get out the house. Not that it would probably matter all that much if Hannibal *did* see him; no doubt he's secretly longing for Will to leave. In fact in this respect, Will's become highly suspicious of the timing of all this as it can't possibly be a coincidence that Hannibal grew so ardent at the precise moment he learnt about the events in America. The whole *seduction* strategy – Will winces internally – has almost certainly been accelerated on the grounds that Will is poised to become *persona non grata* the moment Freddy Lounds' spidery fingers crawl over his typewriter keys, meaning Hannibal will soon be unable to associate with him at all because of the social stigma it'll entail. In other words he took his opportunity while he still could. Will winces again and then weaves his way through the darkness into the consulting room where he finds his jacket (fucking *finally*) along with his coat, scattered across the floor like afterthoughts from the fierce passion of before. Not, of course, that it really is his…In fact maybe Hannibal will change his mind and demand its return now he's attained his objective of adding Will as a bedpost notch and has less incentive to try and win him over? Maybe he should just leave it behind? Although surely Hannibal wouldn't expect him to walk home without one…and then there's the scarf as well, oh *fuck*. Then he gets so preoccupied with this rather pointless dilemma that he doesn't hear a light tread of footsteps in the corridor; and because he was fully expecting Hannibal to remain in the bedroom (possibly to gloat in private), is therefore highly discomposed to glance up and discover that he's actually followed Will downstairs and is now stood staring in the doorway: eternally self-possessed and resplendent in a gorgeously embroidered housecoat that looks like it might well be Oriental. Will's face falls in dismay and he shifts unhappily from one foot to another – desperately trying to think of something to say that's the right combination of dignified yet casual – whilst struggling to ignore a flare of intimidation at the appearance of the tall, imposing figure that appeared so silently and is now looming over him in a somewhat menacing way.

"What has happened Will?" Hannibal finally asks, and Will feels like he could respond with 'I've just come to my senses' or 'I've finally lost my mind' and both would equally be true. Then he switches from his right foot back to his left as the silence begins to stretch out and

fights an urge to plaintively announce: '*don't be nice to me unless you mean it*.' Christ, his fucking head is *agony*. And he's started to stumble again, horribly aware of shadows flickering in his peripheral vision like creeping figures which he knows can't possibly be there. Hallucinations, then; limping, gimlet-eyed and blood-streaked, leering and laughing and lying in wait. The implications of this, not merely for his bodily health but also the wider, almost metaphysical sense of being damaged – deranged, displaced and *different* – is utterly crushing; and when he looks at Hannibal (so distinguished, so steady and sane and dependable) the contrast between the two of them in that moment feels physically painful.

"Will?" repeats Hannibal in a gentle voice; and ironically enough it's the show of kindness that's the final straw. Impatience or disdain would have inspired an answering strain of defiance in Will, or possibly pride, or even anger; but whatever it would have created, it would still have served in strengthening his resolve to conceal how ruined he feels. But *this*…and Will, to his complete horror, can feel his shoulders beginning to tremble and his face crumple in a distinctly ominous way – and, oh shitting bastard buggering *fuck*.

Hannibal watches him for a few seconds, and then abruptly moves towards him in three quick strides before Will is being pulled against his chest.

"Don't Will," he says quietly. "I can hardly bear to see you do it."

"I'm sorry, it's just…I'm tired, and…"

"You are exhausted and overwrought; understandably so. You have had an appalling few weeks." Very gently he strokes his fingers through Will's hair, struggling with the temptation to kiss his head but reluctant to take the risk of it unsettling him even more. "Stay here tonight with me."

"I can't," mutters Will into his shoulder. "I can't, I *can't*."

"Of course you can."

"I can't," says Will tonelessly. Then he wants to add '*and for God's sake stop telling me what to do; stop thinking you know me better than I know myself*' – and probably would except for the awareness that it would be unnecessarily petulant and rude. Nevertheless, having fleetingly let his guard down the defences are now slotting up again and he sounds more in control, more like his normal self (whoever the fuck that is). In fact if anything he's increasingly aware of a deep resentment at the whole situation; and the rush of anger it brings with it is reassuring in its potency. Because of the various sources of catalogued grief, the one thing they nearly all have in common is external attempts at domination and coercion: of being acted upon rather than being left alone to act for himself. *And I still have myself*, thinks Will with a sudden surge of rebellion. It might be a self that's wounded and ravaged, possibly beyond repair, but it's all that he has and he's not just going to surrender it over. My Self: the self that has empathy, autonomy, imagination and inspiration and which has fought its way through 24 agonised years with resolution and fortitude – which has steered its own course, made its own rules and conceded to no one – and emerged at the end of it all from sundry miseries and horrors fundamentally unbowed and unbroken. It's not much comfort, or even much consolation…but it is some. *I can do this,* thinks Will defiantly. Can he? But then what difference does it really make, when it's just one more trial within a lifetime of forcing

himself to do what can't be done? So with a final surge of effort he disentangles himself from Hannibal's arms. For a few seconds they gaze at each other and then Will scrubs his hand over his face, silently turns round, straightens his shoulders – and leaves.

The door shuts behind him with a restrained little *click* that feels a spectacularly unsuitable conclusion for such an overwrought encounter. And Hannibal, in turn, is forced to listen to the sound, and to see the door close, and to watch Will walk away; unpleasantly aware as he does so of experiencing something that is almost entirely unfamiliar – a situation over which he's not in complete control. In fact the abrupt shift in dynamic has a pungently surreal quality to it. Not least because Will, rebellious as always, has insisted on deviating from the script and refused to behave in the way that he was expected to. The way he was *supposed* to; and even in the midst of resenting this, Hannibal can't help but admire how impressively unpredictable and untameable Will really is. This volatile collection of consequence and principles…he moves over to the window and looks into the darkness, his sharp eyes seeking out Will's frail young silhouette at it moves down the length of Harley Street before finally vanishing into the fog.

Even after it's gone he still remains watching: a silent vigil in the middle of the night. The imperative is deeply unknown, and Hannibal is acutely aware of a lack of certainty over what's best to be done with it. Because while he could force Will to come back, or manipulate him into it, or delicately persuade or insidiously coerce (and has no doubt that at some point he could accomplish any, or all, of these things extraordinarily effectively) the one thing he *can't* do is the thing he desires the most: which is to have Will knowingly and cooperatively return – to come back for no better reason than because he wants to be there. *How are the mighty fallen in battle*, thinks Hannibal wryly. Because in a lifetime of tempting fate, scorning retribution and evading pain or penance of any kind, all it's ultimately taken to overpower him was for this diminutive, tattered American boy, fine-boned and fragile with a beautiful mind and a slim dark soul, to unknowingly inflict the most acute punishment possible. So guileless and artless yet so ruthlessly effective: which is to simply take himself away and deny Hannibal access to him.

Normally, of course, there would be various options to muse over in situations such as this: namely to either take back this treasured object by force and then stash it away somewhere so deeply hidden it will never take flight for a second time; or to just annihilate it, because demolishing something means it becomes yours – your very own – far more earnestly and thoroughly than if you'd been its original creator. Both would be a means with which to ensure eternal possession and yet neither can suffice here; neither would be truly fit for purpose. Because if Will was able to abbreviate his emotions into three words then Hannibal is able to do it in two: just two very simple, very concise words, a world away from his usual eloquence and yet which contain an eternity of sensation behind them. *Come. Back*.

There are other word combinations of course, other pairs: one plus one. *Don't leave*. *Stay here*. One plus one equals two, equals you and I. Equals us. And yet in this moment, in this room, in which every placement of every object is reminiscent of Will's presence, the same refrain keeps recurring: come back.

Come back and be somewhere I can always find you; and that you'll always know where to find me. Come back wild and untameable yet provocative and playful; come back grave and

enigmatic – come back entirely yourself. Bring all your thoughts and memories with you, all your darkness and your brilliance, all your lethal glacial beauty, every impulse and imperative, every outlawed thought and every forbidden feeling: every day and every hour for the rest of your life. Come back on foot or carried, come back running or walking; be majestic or despondent, audacious or ferocious; but however you do it come back and light the flare – ignite – immolate all that dark terrain inside yourself and then raze the old to raise the new. Come back and lean against my desk with your hands in your pockets, then run your fingers through your hair and smile and sigh and let me possess you. Come back while you're young and beautiful and gradually grow old in front of me; let me watch you do it, let me watch you for a lifetime. Let me console, complete and transform you, let me see what you can become. Come back, come back; come back to me. Come back and be mine. Come back and let me love you.

Just find your way, just follow your instinct.

Just come back.

Chapter End Notes

Mylimasis = 'beloved' in Lithuanian, so it's a shame Will didn't have Google Translate*. The wonderful Cosmobubbles, who did the translation for my last fic, explained the origins of the word and they're super-romantic (but also complicated so unfortunately I can't remember the details) suffice to say that I've been using it to excess ever since.

* although not really, because Google Translate is complete shit.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Huge thanks to the lovely FannibalBea for making me yet another fab profile picture. She's also asked if it can be considered the officially unofficial cover to my first fic, to which I say: "Why yes...YES IT CAN."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will has no real recollection of getting home, although he obviously must have done because he wakes up next morning in his own bed: still wearing last night's clothes and with a pain in his head that's so piercing it actually makes him moan out loud. He gropes around desperately on the nightstand until he locates the laudanum, then clumsily works off the cap and swallows a few oily drops. His hands are shaking so badly he nearly drops the bottle and the bitter taste makes him wince and cough, but at least it dulls the bleeding edge of the worst of it and after a few moments he can feel the panic, along with the pain, begin to subside. Then he takes a deep shuddering breath and wipes his damp forehead with his sleeve, realising as his drags his arm across his face that a faint trace of Hannibal's expensive cologne is still clinging to the fabric.

Will blinks unhappily several times then pushes his tangled hair from his eyes and begins to track his gaze around the room because he has a half-formed idea that if he can reorient to his current surroundings it might help him calm down. As usual Mrs Bloom has pushed his post beneath the door, and in an attempt to prove that he's fine – and not ill, *definitely* not really ill – he forces himself to get out of bed to retrieve it. The circulars from the parish council and local theatre go straight into the fireplace, as does a fly-bill for a forthcoming hysterical-sounding lecture on *Science and the Machiavelli: New Insights in the Malicious Use of Pharmacology*, although he puts an advertisement for Mudie's circulating library to one side. There's also a letter from Holborn Gentlemen's Club asking if he'd be willing to give a lecture to its members on the Philosophies and Procedures of North American Law Enforcement ('no honorarium available, although luncheon is provided'). "Yeah *right*," says Will before lobbing it into the fire. A request for an interview from *The London Times* follows suit, as do several letters of varying degrees of eccentricity claiming to either know who Jack the Ripper really is (the authors' landlord, nephew and postman respectively, the latter on seemingly on no more promising grounds than '*you never saw such a villainous face in all your life'*), or else offering their services in helping to catch him. By the time he gets to the bottom of the pile the fireplace is so well fed the room is beginning to look vaguely infernal, although the final letter makes him pause because the smattering of American stamps and familiar sloping handwriting immediately signal it as a missive from his father. Will frowns for a few seconds, confused as to why the grudging old bastard has gone to the trouble and expense of spontaneously making contact; and it's only when he's ripped it open and the flimsy crepe-paper greeting card falls out that he remembers today is actually his birthday.

Will places the envelope on his desk, slowly and carefully as if it's something breakable, and then wanders aimlessly over to the window while fighting off a renewed surge of depression. *You're fine*, he mutters to himself, *everything's fine*. Even though he clearly isn't, and it's not, but then what else is there? He rests his forehead against the cooling pane of glass and gazes out into the street, searching out something that might inspire a flicker of interest, or even pleasure – children playing, a pretty girl, a friendly-faced neighbour…anything would do – but is ultimately forced to abandon the quest as hopeless. Outside it's overcast and shadowy: the sky a sickly, glowering dappled dun colour with rain streaming off murky mud-streaked cobbles to trickle into the gutter and all the passers-by swaddled against the cold with heads cast down from a welter of bitter wind. It's ominous weather. Melancholy.

On a day exactly like this, thinks Will bleakly, *I was born*.

It's hardly a reflection designed to instil feelings of cheer so in the end he turns away from the window and makes a forcible effort to pull himself together, only to catch a glimpse of his reflection in the small looking glass hanging by the desk which promptly makes him feel depressed again. He has shadowy purple smudges under both eyes that are so pronounced they might almost be bruises (in contrast to the *actual* bruises on his throat, as livid as bright-edged bites), whereas the rest of his face is chalk white and his hair is wildly tousled. Oh God, he can't possibly go downstairs like this. Beyond rubbing his cheeks to coax some colour into them he's forced to give up on his complexion as beyond saving, although selects a high collared shirt to conceal the marks on his neck and dips his head in the wash stand to tame his hair before combing it back off his face. After that he begins the task of removing and folding up last night's clothes in preparation of returning them, thanking God that none of them are ripped (something of a miracle, all things considered), although admittedly the shop is not going to be overwhelmed with delight at how crumpled they are. They look as if they've been…well, not to put too fine a point on it, as if they've been ripped off him, hastily thrown back on, and slept in afterwards. Then he hesitates again while unfastening his cuffs, because the shirt smells *so strongly* like Hannibal. Will himself does. It's on his hair and skin, lingering over him inside and out, almost as if he's been marked. Hannibal's scent and Hannibal's touch. Hannibal, who is so eternally fascinating whereas Will is so desperately uninspired; who is light on his feet while Will casts a shadow; and who devises and discards his own rules of cascading and fiendish complexity as he goes along, whereas Will trails behind inhibited by rules and rationalisation. An object of indefinite idealisation. Like a genuine artwork, with his patrician bone structure and dark eyes and aristocratic bearing, imbued with all his different hues and tints – from Stygian to luminous – whereas Will is toiling away with a palette that's far more conventional and commonplace...a lot of labour for little result. And he wants so badly to be able to tear the shirt off and lightly drop it onto the floor with a shrug and a sigh, cast it away like it doesn't mean anything – and he hates the fact that he can't.

He can feel a stinging sensation at the back of his eyes and the faintest hint of moisture in the corners, but tells himself that it's just the pain in his head that's causing it. That and the smoke from the fire.

*****

Once Will is safely dressed in his own drably reassuring clothes he goes downstairs to get a glass of water and begin the necessary preparations for leaving the house. Although the headache has temporarily abated his coordination is failing again and he finds himself stumbling in the kitchen doorway – consequently bowling straight into Mrs Bloom and nearly knocking her over in the process. She drops the vase she's carrying, and by some miracle of good fortune Will is able to dart out a hand and catch it before it smashes to pieces on the flagstones.

"Oh God," says Will, flushing scarlet. "I'm *so* sorry. That was terribly clumsy of me."

"Not at all," she replies in a kindly voice. "The fault is just as much mine as yours; I should have looked where I was going."

"It was *entirely* my fault."

Mrs Bloom opens her mouth to argue, but then seems to change her mind halfway through and just regards him meditatively instead. "I hope you don't mind me saying so," she finally says, "but it rather looked to me as if your legs gave way. Are you sure you're feeling quite well?" Will falters for a few seconds at this, gazing wistfully at her pretty, bright-eyed face and wondering whether or not to confide, and she gives him a gentle smile. "You look very pale Will," she adds, as if to encourage him. "Oh forgive me; Margot mentioned that you had been trading Christian names. I hope you don't mind me doing the same?"

"Not at all."

"And you must call me Alana."

"Thank you," says Will, who's now yearning so badly to unburden himself to someone objective yet kindly that it doesn't occur to him to feel self-conscious over doing so.

"Have you seen a doctor? I could recommend a very good one; Dr Summers. He always attends to Margot and myself."

"Thank you but I've already seen one. In Harley Street."

"Harley Street, my goodness!" If she was less tactful, Will is certain she would now be asking how he can possibly afford it.

"Yes, he specialises in…" he hesitates again, but suddenly feels a strong sense that she won't judge him for it. "He's a specialist in nervous complaints."

Alana frowns slightly, and then when she speaks she sounds as if she's choosing her words very carefully. "I hope I'm not imposing when I say this Will, but have you considered a physical explanation? Your gait just then – you looked as if you couldn't control your limbs properly."

This level of insight briefly surprises Will before he remembers Margot mentioning Alana's enthusiasm for lectures and privately decides that she's obviously been attending some medical ones. "Yes, I get headaches," he says in response. "They affect my balance."

“You poor thing, they must be quite severe. Have you been prescribed anything?”

“Yes, an alkaloid tincture – not that it’s done much good.”

“Oh? What was the compound?”

“I don’t know,” admits Will, suddenly feeling foolish that it didn’t occur to him to ask. “It’s helped for the pain relief I suppose. And sleep – definitely for sleep. But not with the…the other symptoms. Sometimes I even thought it might have made things worse, but the doctor said that was just wishful thinking and that it didn’t have any real side-effects.”

“Have you considered stopping for a while and then comparing how you feel when not taking it?” asks Alana, before adding tactfully: “Of course I’m not impugning the judgement of the doctor who prescribed it. Only that I gather such infusions may often become contaminated during the manufacturing process. Apparently it depends on the type of base solution which is used.”

“Do really you think so?” asks Will, suddenly looking hopeful, before adding in a gloomier voice, “But then it does help with the headaches. I’m not sure I could bear the pain otherwise.”

“I have some willow bark I’ll happily give you,” she replies, then laughs when she sees Will’s confused expression. “No doubt I sound like the village witch but I’m afraid I have something of a mania for learning about new medical treatments. Margot calls me The Apothecary. At any rate, I attended a rather fascinating lecture by a trio of German chemists who have been working on a synthesis of salicylate acid and acetyl chloride.” Will can’t help admiring the impressive fluency with which she pronounces these mysterious scientific terms, and she catches his eye and smiles at him again. “I won’t bore you with the details now, but suffice to say that this humble little botanical has powerful analgesic properties. They hope that one day it could be developed as a commercially produced painkiller: *Aspirin*. Imagine that.”

“That’s incredibly kind,” says Will fervently. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. I’ll fetch it for you now. Are you going to Scotland Yard after this?”

Will nods instead of responding and she gives him a sympathetic look. “It must be such a trial for you,” she adds after a solemn little pause. “I can’t even imagine it.”

“Someone’s got to do it,” says Will bleakly.

“But not just anyone could; and even fewer would attempt it. We can see the toll it takes on you Will, Margot and I; we’ve both noticed the terrible strain you’re under. And yet you force yourself onwards nonetheless. You put duty and service ahead of yourself. It’s truly heroic.”

Will smiles faintly then bites his bottom lips as he suddenly remembers the words from last night: ‘*Fearlessness might be a gift of nature and temperament; but true courage is not the absence of fear, but rather feeling afraid and persevering regardless*.’ Those darkly piercing eyes boring into his, Hannibal’s face directly over his own. The touch that was gentle yet

searing, the hypnotic voice, the brush of lips against his skin…the way it felt. He closes his eyes for a few seconds then just as abruptly snaps them open. “Thank you,” is all he says.

“You’re welcome.” She makes as if to leave but then suddenly turns back again, her long skirt making a gentle *swishing* noise as it swirls against the floorboards, and reaches out and presses his hand with hers. “I’m so glad you came to us Will,” she says, her voice softly sincere.

“You are?” asks Will, a bit uncomprehendingly.

“Of course. And so is Margot.”

And Will gazes numbly back at her, longing to return the pressure of her touch and to place his hand over hers, yet completely unable to do so because of the sudden, pulverising unhappiness that right now – possibly at this very moment – *The Tattle Crime* could be rolling off the printing press before being shovelled into carts and barrows and spread across the city like as many spadefuls of filth...and the knowledge that once this happens no amount of cleansing and scrubbing will ever be able to wash him clean in her mind again. He can almost envisage it: the scandalised sympathy of her many friends, the way they’ll cover their mouths with their hands as their lips form little portals of horrified disapproval. “Oh my *dear*, to only think you had that dreadful man in your home the entire time! Under your own *roof*. How simply terrible for you. Although of course one never can trust the Americans, such a coarse breed as they are...” And how Alana and Margot will exchange sad, brave glances, and shake their heads, and say how normal Will appeared – although perhaps in retrospect there was always something a *little* odd about him – and how they’ll never rent out a room again, not after such a dreadful deception; certainly not.

Alana is still smiling gently at him: still pressing his hand, still liking and approving of him – still thinking he’s a good person. And he wants to plead with her to remain that way, to not let go of him, even though he knows it’s impossible. *Remember me how I am now*, he wants to say. *Please. Don’t forget me. Whatever happens afterwards; just remember this*.

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Will arrives at Scotland Yard to find it in a state of disarray owing to the fact that the ancient boiler, which has apparently been threatening to expire for several months, has finally made up its mind to do so and left the building doing a convincing impression of an ice box. The usual tradesman is unavailable until the following day, so Will goes down to the basement himself and spends a rather restful half hour with his shirt sleeves rolled up and oil smudged across his cheek attempting to fix it. The logical mechanics of copper pipes and cast iron valves are rather reassuring in their predictability and he’s almost disappointed when the gas finally fires and the chamber comes roaring back to life. “Splendid job!” says Jack in delight when he sees it, and Will gives a pale smile in response then thrusts his hands into his pockets and stares at the floor, trying to summon up the courage to indulge in a spot of *carpe diem* (or whatever) and confess about the impending catastrophe that’s brewing courtesy of Freddy Lounds.

“It’s a temperamental old bugger,” Jack is now saying. He aims a kick at the base of the boiler, which gives a seismic groan in response, and he promptly retreats a few paces as if

afraid of arousing its wrath. “Scotland Yard is built on the site of an old Roman settlement and I sometimes think they must have left this thing behind.”

“More likely from the Dark Ages sir, the Romans were amazing plumbers.”

Jack gives a bark of laughter then takes a closer look at Will’s face and hesitates before adding “Is anything the matter Mr Graham?” in an uncertain tone of voice.

“Actually there is,” says Will. “I’d like a word in your office please Mr Crawford. In private.”

Jack looks questioning, and then rather stern, then nods his acquiescence before gesturing towards the staircase to indicate that Will should go first and he’ll follow on. They walk to the room in a rather ominous silence, upon which Jack closes the door and takes a seat behind his desk while Will composes his features into a suitably *carpe diem*-like expression and steels himself for the gruelling task ahead. *Mental preparation, strengthened resolve*…the phrase ‘girding one’s loins’ comes to mind. Even though it’s a rather stupid saying; what does it even mean anyway? Why would loins *want* to be girded…

“Are you unwell Mr Graham?” asks Jack abruptly.

Will wonders, rather wildly, how Jack would respond if he announced ‘Don’t mind me sir, I’m just girding my loins – carry on.’ No doubt his *carpe diem* face is what’s raised the alarm; it’s probably less suggestive of mental fortitude than it is of someone in the throes of acute digestive distress (or possibly whose loins have been girded too tightly). *Oh for God’s sake,* snaps Will to himself, *get a grip on yourself you stupid shit*. He clears his throat then folds his hands neatly onto the desk and Jack raises his eyebrows expectantly. Will opens his mouth and closes it again. Jack’s eyebrows descend and furrow over his nose. Will sighs a bit helplessly. *Oh God you are completely and utterly loinless; you are without loins to gird*.

“Something’s obviously wrong,” Jack finally says in an unusually kindly voice. “You’d probably do better to tell me.”

“I know,” says Will. “I *know*. It’s just…it’s difficult. Sir.”

“Yes I can see that.”

Will sighs again then in spite of himself rehearses the words from last night. Last night, stood by the window, staring into the fog with long fingers pressed against his throat: *True courage is not the absence of fear, but rather feeling afraid and persevering regardless.* He takes a deep breath and forces himself to look Jack in the face for the first time since entering the office.

“Mr Crawford,” he says in a forcibly level voice, “how much do you know about the events that caused me to leave America?”

“Everything,” replies Jack promptly, and Will’s mouth falls open in surprise. “Well of *course* I know,” adds Jack. “Commissioner Purnell was very frank in his correspondence. He could hardly have been otherwise.”

Will immediately feels a faint stir of several sensations: the first being relief on the grounds that the worst part of the task is over (and with an unexpectedly easy resolution); the second being an entirely novel awareness of having something other than complete loathing towards Purnell. “That’s good,” he says fervently. “I’m glad you know.”

“And why is that?” asks Jack shrewdly.

Will takes another deep breath: *one down, one to go*. “Because soon everyone is going to know, sir: a journalist has found out about it as well. Freddy Lounds from *The Tattle Crime*.” He can’t help noticing that Jack – who of course has also been a regular and repeated target of *Tattle Crime* barbs himself – gives an involuntary grimace at the familiar name. “He’s going to publish an exposé about me. Anytime now; possibly he’s done it already.”

“He told you this himself?”

“Yes,” says Will miserably, suddenly unable to describe exactly what else Freddy told him to do.

“I *see*,” replies Jack. He sighs heavily and runs a hand across his face. “Well…this is very unfortunate Mr Graham.”

“I know it is sir.”

“Although not entirely unexpected – I’ll be frank with you, I was rather afraid something of this nature might happen. I was never happy with all that publicity when you first arrived, and neither was the Chief Superintendent. Oh I know it wasn’t your fault,” he adds as Will opens his mouth to protest, “but the level of interest meant it was almost inevitable something might leak out eventually; especially when the Freddy Lounds of this world are involved. You Americans might have coined the term ‘yellow journalism,’ but I’m afraid we’re more than capable of practicing it here.”

“I know. I’m very sorry Mr Crawford.”

“Yes I suppose you are. Although you don’t really have all that much to apologise for given that it happened long before you arrived. After all, your behaviour since you joined us has been exemplary.”

Have to contradict you there sir, thinks Will gloomily, *considering I spent all last night breaking the Gross Indecency Laws in an exemplary way – with none other than the Chief Superintendent’s favourite medical consultant – and then had an exemplary mental breakdown straight afterwards; but only because I didn’t get a chance to break the sodomy ones as well*. Out loud he says “So what would you like me to do?” before faltering slightly and looking at the floor again. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” says Jack immediately. “Not at all. You’ve already proved yourself an invaluable part of the investigation and I hardly think those poor souls in the East End are going to care if this maniac is brought to justice by an officer who once did something regrettable when he was seriously ill. Besides, Scotland Yard looks after its own; it doesn’t throw them to the maw of the press. We’ll weather the storm as it happens Mr Graham – no need to look quite

so tragic." He pushes out his chair and walks round the desk and Will, assuming he's being dismissed, stands up too; only to find himself enveloped in a clumsy yet undeniably fatherly hug. "It's all right son," says Jack kindly. And because Will is in desperate need of touch that isn't intended to harm or coerce – or, for that matter, erotically devour – he not only allows it but actually hugs Jack back.

"What's all this?" asks Price, who's just walked in. "Mr Crawford, why are you holed up in your office with small bearded men clasped to your bosom? Oh it's you is it, Mr Graham. Why are you being clasped to Mr Crawford's bosom? Is this some new attempt at improving Anglo-American relations? Should I be clasping you likewise?"

Jack quirks an eyebrow in an obvious 'should I tell him?' gesture and Will wavers for a few seconds before his nerve (or, indeed, loins) fail him and he gives an infinitesimal shake of the head. Such reticence is ridiculous of course, he knows it is – Price is going to find out eventually, after all – but with the same melancholy imperative inspired by Alana, he still wants to prolong the moment when the way Price thinks about him irrevocably alters. It's different with Jack, because he already knew. But as far as everyone else is concerned he feels protective over this version of himself and wants to preserve it for as long as possible: give it its final few days of sunlight and freedom before it withers and dies.

Jacks nods slightly in silent acknowledgement and then out loud says: "It's nothing Jim."

"Well it's clearly *something*," replies Price. "Although I see I am going to be denied any bosom-clasping of my own and that you are determined to keep The Land of the Free and Home of the Brave all to yourself. I shall simply have to improvise and find an English alternative. Mr Graham, when you have grown weary of being embraced then please come and see me outside; there are some reports I would like your opinion on."

"Yes of course," says Will. He runs his hand through his hair and sags sideways against the desk once Price has left. "Thank you Mr Crawford – for your discretion, I mean."

"They'll find out eventually," replies Jack. "It might be better to just get it over with."

Out in the hallway, Price can be heard shouting: "Mr Zeller, come here if you please! I wish to clasp you to my bosom."

"I know, it's just…I suppose I want to put it off for as long as possible."

"Well, it's your choice of course," says Jack briskly, reverting to his more typical manner. "And business as usual in the meantime. You'd better go and see what Dr Price wants."

"Yes. Thank you sir."

"You're welcome." The kindly demeanour briefly reappears like a lantern flicking on and off, and Will gives a rather wan smile in return before heading into the main office where he finds Price and Zeller poring over stacks of what look like autopsy reports intermingled with the occasional coroner's statement. He pulls up a chair and begins to leaf through a few of them himself, but it's hard to concentrate and he can feel his mind straining with the urge to wander off. *Wander where?* thinks Will dreamily, *where do I want to go?* Even though it's an

utterly pointless question, because really – where else would he go? Dark eyes in an angular face, a scalding touch with ties that bind and sensuous words in a smoky voice. Beauty and horror. *You're quite the alchemist aren't you Will?*

"Are you all right?" asks Zeller abruptly.

Will flinches then looks up, briefly disorientated. "I'm sorry," he says, "what was that?"

"I asked if you were all right?"

"Lovesick," says Price, "in my humble medical opinion. Look at those calf's eyes gazing aimlessly into space – a sure sign. Cheer up Mr Graham; they always say that the easiest way to get over someone is to get underneath someone else."

Will can't help laughing at how unexpectedly risqué this is and Price smiles too and then adds more seriously: "*Are* you all right?"

"Yes," lies Will. Price raises a single sceptical eyebrow. "Mostly yes."

"You could always ask Mr Crawford to embrace you again. In fact I'm of a mind to ask him myself; perhaps we all should. We can form an orderly queue outside his office door. Mr Zeller, do you wish to be embraced by Mr Crawford?"

"No," says Zeller without glancing up from his pages.

"Well in that case you won't mind going and fetching us some lunch then will you? Off you go, chop chop. Some cuts of meat, I think, and a bit of salad. And buy a jug of beer as well would you; *The Prince's Arms* will be open by now. You really need to get yourself a minion Mr Graham," he adds as Zeller's tall frame ambles mutinously towards the exit, "I'm sure it would put the occasional smile on that little bearded face of yours. Now take a look at these, what do you think?"

"What are they?" asks Will, forcing himself (with some effort) to focus on the documents that Price is now waving back and forth.

"A collection of older cases from the coroner's office. Unlike *some* medical colleagues – of whom I shall mention no names, beyond the unfortunate fact that their idiocy has been known to disturb the Earth's gravitational pull – I have been very intrigued by your theory about two different murderers; and on reflection have decided to take them seriously. As such I believe I may have found a few new cases that we can ascribe to the original Ripper."

"Oh good *work*," says Will. He seizes hold of the papers with a newfound energy, immediately feeling his tiredness draining away. "I *knew* it – look here, see how the incisions have been made? It's undoubtedly a different person. And here. And here. The way the bodies were arranged..." He traces his finger from one photograph to another before gradually growing quiet, frowning to himself and biting his thumbnail. "It's unmistakable Dr Price. There are two of them out there."

Price runs his eyes over the spread of papers and then gives a low whistle. “You’re right,” he says quietly. “It’s unmistakable.”

“Yes.”

They exchange a foreboding look and then Price shakes his head. “It’s also a travesty,” he adds in a solemn voice. “Good God, how *could* this have been allowed to happen? That the first one could remain undetected for so long?”

“Because the pattern wasn’t obvious. No one was able to link the victims together as a series.”

“No, I suppose not,” says Price gloomily.

“*No*,” confirms Will. He runs his hands through his hair and then abruptly pushes back his chair and spins round to face Price. “And so that’s exactly what we’re going to do right now.”

*****

Several hours later and Zeller has returned with the food (and been despatched again twice) and a small crowd of police officers have gathered at a respectful distance to observe the sight of Will and Price with their shirt sleeves rolled up brandishing magnifying glasses and flinging papers across the desk as Will emits the occasional “Here! Look!” and Price nods excitedly and says “Yes! Oh *very* good Mr Graham.” After another hour the gas lamps are being lit and the crowd has doubled in size before Jack materialises to give his approval; and after yet another hour Zeller has broken three pen nibs through frantic scribbling as Will finally hands the last remaining report to Price who nods in agreement and triumphantly adds it the pile at the head of the table – at which point the spectators break into a spontaneous round of applause.

“The net’s closing,” says Will, whose pale face is looking unusually animated despite his obvious tiredness. “We’re going to get him, I can feel it.”

“Well at least my earlier question’s finally been answered,” replies Price admiringly. “Now we know why the first Ripper escaped detection for so long.”

“Why?”

“Simply put, Mr Graham; because you hadn’t come to us yet.”

“No, we did it together.”

Price smiles fondly and raises his glass in Will’s direction before adding: “Well we wouldn’t have done it at all it you hadn’t realised that it needed doing. I’d propose a toast, only it would be a poor reward for all your hard work given that this beer is utterly dreadful. What was Mr Zeller thinking? It’s so diluted it would have been more candid on the part of the landlord to sell him a pint of water.”

“Message arrived for you Mr Graham,” says one of the porters.

“Thank you,” replies Will. He glances at the handwriting on the envelope, then blanches slightly and crumples it into his pocket.

“Are you all right?” asks Price who’s watching him very closely. “You’ve gone rather pale.”

“Bit of a headache.”

“You’re not coming down with anything are you?” He pushes Will’s hair out the way and places a cool palm on his forehead. “You seem to be running a temperature – perhaps stay in bed tomorrow?”

“Perhaps.”

“No perhaps about it Mr Graham; stay in bed. You’re burning up. Not that I’m surprised with this wig – your poor head is positively saturated with hair. You should go for the receding look, like I do myself. Now have some food and then get yourself home. Doctor’s orders.” He hands Will a brown paper bag with a slab of suet pastry inside and Will peers at it rather cautiously. “Steak and kidney pudding,” clarifies Price. “As English as the Union Jack.”

“Ugh…kidneys?”

“What? Are Americans too rarefied to consume offal? Have a taste, they’re very good. Mr Zeller got them from the cook shop on The Strand and unlike that infernal landlord at *The Prince’s Arms* his produce is beyond reproach.”

Will takes the bag and nibbles half-heartedly on the contents while Price begins stacking together the piles of autopsy reports. “Extraordinary that we’ve got two who’re taking anatomical trophies,” he says, more to himself than to Will. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Can we not discuss anatomical trophies while I’m eating kidney?”

“Point taken. And yet isn’t that a striking thing in itself – to have such a thing in common yet be at such variance in every other respect. The second one’s chaotic and frenzied and the first one…”

“I don’t know,” says Will slowly. “I don’t know yet what the first one is.”

“Well the gendered element is lacking. Jack the Ripper has a preference for uniquely female organs.”

“I know,” replies Will, frustrated all over again at the memory. “I said that to Mr Crawford almost from the beginning.” He glances at the shredded slivers of meat oozing inside the pastry and then grimaces slightly and replaces it in its bag as his stomach gives a faint twinge of protest.

“Yet the first Ripper isn’t approaching his male victims in the same way,” muses Price. “Their gender is incidental as far as his choice of surgical souvenirs go.”

“Agreed,” replies Will, but he’s frowning as he says it because he knows this isn’t entirely true. It’s *not* incidental; it can’t possibly be…because of course Jack the Ripper isn’t selecting his trophies indiscriminately, so why on earth would the first killer be doing so? But on what feasible grounds? *Think*, mutters Will to himself. *Think! It’s there somewhere; it’s right in front of you*. Silently he mulls over the list again. Pancreas, heart, thymus, liver…

“*Kidney*,” says Will out loud. And then, in a hushed voice: “Christ.”

“What?” asks Price, alarmed by the look on Will’s face. “What is it?”

“The organs, the choice of organs! Dr Price it’s not random.”

“You mean he’s…what? Harvesting them?”

“No,” says Will bleakly. “He’s *eating* them.”

*****

“Eating them?” says Jack slowly.

“Mr Crawford, I know how it sounds but trust me on this. I wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t sure.”

“But…*eating* them?”

“Cannibalism – yes. I’ve seen it before. The case I was involved with…well, you know, just before I came to London. It’s not common, and it’s not well understood, but it does happen and it’s what happening here.”

“But this is London,” says Jack, almost plaintively. He glances briefly at the standard-issue portrait of Queen Victoria behind his desk as if imploring her to intervene. “This is *England*.”

“The ‘centre of the civilised world’; yes, I *know*. But human beings aren’t radically different no matter where they are, neither in time or place.” Jack scowls, obviously unconvinced. “Where do you think fables about vampires and werewolves first came from?” adds Will, trying to think of an illustrative point. “Because people found the remains of victims from killers just like Jack the Ripper and couldn’t credit how another human being could do such a thing. A supernatural explanation becomes more reassuring – easier to understand. But we know that people are capable of doing terrible things.” Will pauses and looks bleak again. “I know that as well as anyone. I’m telling you Mr Crawford; we’ve got separate killers here. Not just one but *two*. One extremely reckless and one incredibly cunning; but both *extraordinarily* dangerous.”

“And you’d know all about that wouldn’t you?” announces an unpleasantly familiar voice.

“Oh – Frederick,” says Jack waspishly. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” replies Dr Chilton. “You must have been simply *engrossed* with Mr Graham’s lurid narrative. I have to say you’re wasted in law enforcement Mr Graham; you should be churning out copy for the Penny Dreadfuls.”

“Look we’re actually rather busy here,” snaps Jack, with barely concealed irritation. “So if there’s nothing in particular that you wanted…”

“Oh I wouldn’t say *that*.” Slowly and deliberately Dr Chilton reaches into the inside pocket of his overcoat, prolonging the gesture as long as possible for dramatic effect, before triumphantly retrieving a copy of *The Tattle Crime.* And Will promptly feels all the blood drain away from his face, staring at it in numb misery as Dr Chilton begins to brandish it back and forth in the manner of a stage conjuror pulling a rabbit from a hat. *Only it would be a dead rabbit*, thinks Will, a bit wildly. *Something malformed and monstrous; the audience would cry out in horror*. He can clearly see his photograph beneath the blocky black typeset – typeset so familiar from its screaming pronouncements about Jack the Ripper – and which appear bizarre and unfeasible in connection to himself. And yet there it is; and there *he* is right along with it: *Setting a Monster to Catch a Monster* by Freddy Lounds.

“Fresh off the printing press,” announces Dr Chilton venomously. “So in response to your question Jack, then yes. Yes there is *certainly* something most particular that I want.”

Jack, to his credit, doesn’t falter for even a moment before placing a steadying hand on Will’s shoulder and replying “Yes, I know about it already Frederick,” in a suitably august voice.

Dr Chilton, less skilled at holding his composure than either Jack or Will, briefly looks taken aback at this calm rebuttal. Nevertheless the reprieve is short-lived, and he swallows down his disappointment and recovers himself almost immediately before replying: “Good for you Jack. But what about *them*?” He waves a perfectly-manicured hand towards the outside office. “Do *they* know?”

“Not as far as I’m aware,” replies Jack in the same stately tone. “We’re going to do a phased announcement.” Will looks up in alarm and Jack gives him the ghost of a wink.

Dr Chilton shuffles his feet with irritation. The meeting is clearly not going as planned, although Will can tell that he’s not going to let a few early setbacks deter him and sure enough he makes a performance of straightening the lapels on his coat before clearing his throat and renewing the offensive. “Well I’m glad you’re suitably informed and prepared Jack,” he adds after a pause, “but you see the problem I have is not only limited to the newspaper coverage. I’ve consistently been hearing somewhat troubling things about Mr Graham; one of my trustees, for example – Mr Froideveaux. Do you remember Mr Froideveaux Will? The way you reacted when he told you about the murder of the Fitzroy ostler? The *very ostler*,” says Dr Chilton theatrically, as if he’s forgotten his surroundings and thinks he’s treading the boards at The Globe, “who was murdered in a matter not *entirely* dissimilar to…well, I’ll leave you to discover the details in your own time Jack. And of course Mr Graham is already well aware of them.” He flings the paper down onto the desk in a contemptuous way.

“The murder at the Fitzroy hotel?” says Jack sharply.

“No, this is utterly ridiculous,” replies Will in a voice that, by some miracle of self-possession, he’s able to keep relatively calm and level. “I’m not denying my manner was a little odd when I saw Mr Froideveaux, but as he’s well aware – and as I explained at the time

– I had a severe headache. He could tell himself I was ill; he even offered to fetch Dr Lecter for me."

"Oh yes," says Dr Chilton, his tone dripping with disdain. "Your *headaches.* They do seem to be rather conveniently timed don't they? No doubt the Ripper will turn out to be susceptible to them too."

"Frederick!" thunders Jack.

"No Jack, you're quite right," says Dr Chilton unctuously. "I'm forgetting myself. Only I'm afraid I can't possibly overlook this. The Ripper investigation has gone completely off the rails as it is. Imagine how the public is going to react when they discover Mr Graham's sordid little backstory and realise he's been allowed to continue running around completely unsupervised. The scandal, Jack! It might cost you your job and frankly I wouldn't be at all surprised if it did. Now I'm not denying that Mr Graham might be very brilliant and all that sort of thing, but what you must also concede is that Mr Graham is also very unbalanced. I mean have you *heard* him?" Dr Chilton adopts a truly excruciating American accent and flaps his hands around in what's obviously meant to a pantomime of hysteria. "'*He's eating them*.' For heaven's sakes Jack!"

"Well he is," says Will defiantly. "You've seen all the same reports as I have and you still don't agree? You must be either stupid or *blind*."

"What did you just say to me Mr Graham?"

"Oh sorry – I meant stupid or deaf."

"That's enough!" bellows Jack. "Frederick, I appreciate your concern for the Yard's reputation but Mr Graham stays where he is."

"But it's not quite as simple as that is it?" replies Dr Chilton, nodding reverently towards the portrait behind Jack's desk. "Scotland Yard is hardly your private fiefdom after all. It's a public institution on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen."

"Well go and bitch about it to her then," snaps Will.

"Things as they are simply won't do," continues Dr Chilton as if Will hasn't spoken. "No, they won't do at all. I would be neglecting the dignity of my office…" he pauses, obviously liking the way this sounds, and promptly decides to say it again, "…the dignity of my *office* if I stood tamely by and did nothing. Which is why I intend to present my concerns to the Home Secretary first thing tomorrow."

For the first time Jack begins to look seriously uncomfortable. "Now look here Frederick, don't you think that's taking things a little far?"

"On the contrary, it wouldn't be taking them far enough. Although that's not to say I don't accept your concerns about involving Mr Matthews." He pauses and delicately inspects his fingernails before glancing up slyly at Jack. "And naturally I don't want to cause you that

level of aggravation if there was a way to avoid it. In fact that's why I'm here – I believe I may have found a…how shall I put it? A more *mutually satisfactory* solution."

"Which is what?"

"Which is – give Mr Graham over to me."

"No!" says Will, shrinking away.

"It's by far the best course of action," replies Dr Chilton blithely. "Mr Graham comes to my asylum for a suitable period of time; upon which we tell the newspapers that he's been thoroughly examined and vetted by myself and won't be allowed to work amongst the general public until such times as I have pronounced him of sound mind and good character. Everybody benefits. You, Jack, avoid the opprobrium of the press and the politicians; I get to acquaint myself with a rather fascinating case; and you, Mr Graham, get to stop causing so many *headaches* for everyone else," he gives a nasty little smile, "and vindicate yourself one way or the other."

"Well, perhaps it's not a *bad* idea," says Jack, rather reluctantly. "It would appease the public after all."

"Mr Crawford! Please!" says Will desperately.

"But Dr Chilton giving you the all clear *would* be an easy way of ensuring you could remain on the investigation – then when the fuss has died down Dr Price and I could come and get you out again in a day or two."

"Well I hardly think it would be as quick as *that*," says Dr Chilton.

"Look, I understand about the value of medical clearance," stammers Will, fighting to remain calm. "But ask Dr Price. Or…or Dr Lecter."

"Drs Price and Lecter are hardly impartial though, are they?" Dr Chilton replies, once again ignoring Will and addressing himself directly to Jack. "Considering that Mr Graham works with one and has been consulting with the other. Myself, on the other hand…" He pauses thoughtfully. "I have a carriage waiting outside; if we left now I could have him there within the hour."

"No!" says Will, who's now gone extremely pale. "Absolutely not."

"I'm afraid I'm not asking your permission Mr Graham," says Dr Chilton. "This would be an enforced committal." He retrieves his copy of *The Tattle Crime* and brandishes it in Will's face. "And for very good reason."

Will glances at Jack with wide panicky eyes, unable to believe that this is really happening, and then promptly wishes he hadn't because he immediately recognises the expression of gloomy resignation on the latter's face. It's there in the furrow of the brow, the downward tilt of the mouth, and the awkward guilty reluctance to meet Will's eye. It's a countenance that says '*I'm deeply unhappy about this but I don't know what else to do for the best.'* And it's

this, probably more than anything else, which crushes Will's final hope and realise that – yes, this is real; this is actually happening; and that's it actually happening to *him,* even though it's surely the type of thing that should only ever happen to other people. He knows that it does happen, of course; in fact it happens all the time, he's often read about it in the newspapers. There's even a name for it: *Malicious Lunacy Incarceration*. Conspiracies to certify and conceal sane people within the confines of a Mad House: wealthy relatives whose inheritance is coveted, unwanted wives, unmarried mothers, troublemaking younger sons or disobedient elder ones…all inconvenient in some way, all destined to be branded as lunatics and deprived of their freedom and – if they're fortunate enough to be liberated – to become the subject of newspaper editorials that people like Will are supposed to read about and be horrified by. It happens so often that laws were made to try and stop it. But the laws don't work; the laws have terrifying gaps and loopholes. They don't protect everyone – they don't protect people like Will.

Will knows all of this, but what he also knows – and is perhaps the worst knowledge of all – is that the victims are often so traumatised by the experience that they actually *do* lose their reason even after their release: the ultimate nightmarish coda. *The Times* wrote an editorial about it following a particularly infamous case: how the asylum is a "*hopeless prison, which is calculated to unsettle the steadiest intellect and to inflict agonies on the most cheerful spirit*." And it's hardly as if Will's own intellect and spirit were all that steady to begin with. In fact their lack of steadiness is at the heart of the whole issue, because isn't it the reason he's being coveted in the first place? He casts a surreptitious glance at Dr Chilton's gloating face, and the blaze of triumph clearly written on it immediately confirms his suspicion that this isn't really anything to do with legitimate concern or caution as opposed to an ideal opportunity for Dr Chilton to get Will exactly where he wants him: at his mercy. He can still remember the latter after Charlotte Tate's inquest, glancing suggestively at Jack and intimating that he already knew about Will's odd abilities. No doubt he's been looking for a chance like this ever since, biding his time and lying in wait while plotting the articles he'll write, the lectures he'll give, the reputation he'll seek…all forged on the alter of Will's sanity as the ultimate sacrificial case study. Why would he ever want to let Will go? "*He's deteriorated*," Dr Chilton will tell Jack when he comes to demand Will's release. "*You can't see him today – perhaps try again next week*." And then Jack will come the next week, and the week after that, coming every week in expectation of an improvement that will never be allowed to happen, until one day he'll stop coming at all. And in that moment Will knows beyond all reasonable doubt that if he allows himself to be taken to this medical penitentiary then he almost certainly won't be coming out again.

"All right," says Will carefully. "I understand; but only for a week or so. Mr Crawford? You have to come and get me – a fortnight at most."

Jack looks deeply unhappy. "A week," he says. "Is that understood Frederick? One week and no more."

Dr Chilton smiles non-committedly without agreeing one way or the other, and Will pulls on his coat and slowly knots the scarf into place. "Let me walk out of here unescorted," he adds, deliberately staring at the floor in what he hopes is a convincing display of brave resignation. "I don't want to make a scene."

“Understood,” says Dr Chilton. “Come along then.”

“Goodbye Mr Crawford,” says Will. For a second his eyes meet Jack’s and then he silently turns and leaves, Dr Chilton hovering possessively at his side the whole time. It’s rather like a modern version of the march of the penitent – a walk of shame – and he’s acutely aware of the way the main office slowly falls silent as one by one people glance up and freeze as they catch sight of him. The news has obviously spread already then…how delighted Freddy would be if he knew. The multiple pairs of swivelling eyes bore into Will like as many slings and arrows, but he ignores them all and gazes fixedly into the distance: one hand in his pocket so he can clutch onto the envelope that the porter brought him previously – not that long ago at all really, only a few hours, but which already feels like it happened in a different lifetime. He uses the feel of it beneath his fingertips to gather some sense of strength and purpose, knowing full well whose hands have previously touched it, whose possession it’s been in; and the more people stare and the louder they whisper, the harder he holds onto it. Then he’s reaching the door and stepping out into the street and straight ahead is Dr Chilton’s carriage with two men standing next to it, whose coarse brutal faces and stained leather overalls immediately identify them as keepers from the asylum.

It’s started to rain now: heavy drops that set up a grim, droning rhythm as they pound onto the cobblestones and ricochet from the roof of the carriage. The water draggles Will’s hair over his dripping forehead and he has to keep swiping strands out of his eyes, realising too late that he’s left his hat in Jack’s office. Not that it really matters…he always hated that hat.

“Come along Mr Graham,” says Dr Chilton impatiently. “What are you waiting for? In you go. I thought you didn’t want to make a scene.”

“I don’t.”

“Then get in the carriage.”

“I will. I’m going to. But…Dr Chilton?”

“What?”

“I’m *frightened*,” says Will. He lets his voice quiver as if it’s on the verge of breaking and rubs his hand over his forehead.

“Now now Mr Graham,” replies Dr Chilton with an edge to his voice. “Be a man. You know it’s for the best.”

“Yes,” says Will tremulously. *Come on then you stupid bastard, just a bit closer. Christ, what’s the matter with you?* He lets his shoulders sag and covers his face with his other hand; and Dr Chilton finally takes the hint and moves forward to take hold of Will and push him into the carriage – at which point Will abruptly snaps upright, pivots his neck and rears back his head in order to bring it smashing down against Dr Chilton’s perfectly straight nose with a hugely satisfying crack.

After that everything becomes a bit of a blur. Will’s head, which never needs much provocation to behave like a massive asshole, is now throbbing in an angry pulsating way and

his eyes are swimming with the force of the impact although he's still unpleasantly aware of Dr Chilton flailing and howling to his left as the two attendants swarm down on him from the front, one of whom is brandishing a battered wooden cudgel and the other – Will's eyes widen in dismay – a horsewhip.

"You vicious little bastard," the first one is now saying. "You're going to seriously regret that."

Come on, you can do this, mutters Will to himself. *Focus*, *goddammit; just a few more seconds and then you're done*. Someone must have heard the disturbance by now – or if they haven't they soon will – so he knows that speed is imperative and whatever he does has to be fast and accurate, because there's simply no time for mistakes. The keepers are still bearing down, trying to box him up against the wall, so Will quickly side-steps to the right and in doing so manages to miss the full force of the whip as it slices down and catches him with a stinging blow on the top of the cheekbone. He can feel blood beginning to trickle down his face like tears but ignores it and with a colossal level of effort forces his exhausted eyes to track over the nearest man, calculating the precise second his brawny arm is going to come swinging down so he can neatly duck to avoid it. The man staggers, briefly caught off balance, so Will kicks the back of his kneecap to send him crashing over then stamps on his wrist until he drops the cudgel. Then he swoops down to pick it up and, without rising to his feet again, jabs it sharply into the stomach of the second man whose breath promptly comes rushing out his mouth in a sour surge of air before he collapses wheezing and gasping against the side of the carriage. It's all over in an instant and Will takes a deep breath himself then summons up his last remaining reserves of strength and sets off running down the street.

"Stop him!" screams Dr Chilton.

But there's no one on hand to stop him, and by the time Dr Chilton has staggered back into Scotland Yard to raise the alarm and a few desk sergeants have made a fumbling attempt at pursuit, Will has cleared the length of Charing Cross and is long gone. The deserted streets are black and glistening and his feet pound out a desperate, despairing rhythm as he sprints past empty shops and boarded-up windows, blank and pitiless as blind eyes in dead faces and coldly impervious to the scene that's playing out in front of them. His entire body is screaming in protest and he keeps thinking he can hear shouts of *'There he is!'* yet has lost the capacity to tell whether it's really there or a mirage wrought out of fatalistic dread and enervation. *Don't stop, don't stop,* chants Will to himself, trying to match the words to the beat of his footsteps. *Run down the road, swerve round the barrels and barrows, for God's sake don't trip, don't fall, don't falter – fucking run. Run for your life*. He lunges down one street, then up another one, then across a patch of dimly lit alleyway, then over a set of railings; fearful that he's lost his bearings then certain that he's recovered them; swerving round lampposts and leaping over kerbstones; briefly in a state of hopeful fortitude, predominantly in the most crushing fear and doubt…but the entire time driven by a tumult of desperation that lends a speed and fleetness of foot he genuinely didn't think himself capable of as each agonised step puts a greater distance between himself and the asylum.

Will runs for another few minutes and then finally collapses against the dingy wall of an alleyway, trembling with shock and exhaustion and trying not to moan out loud at the excruciating pain in his head. In fact *everything* hurts. His face is smarting from the cut of the

whip, his legs are stinging from the lactic acid and his fucking lungs feel ready to burst. Bursting lungs…is that even possible? What if they actually did; how would it look and feel? Would they slowly sigh and sink in on themselves, deflating like tired balloons or rupture apart, splashily and showily like scarlet glass? And he's undeniably feverish now, his face so hot he's surprised the raindrops don't sizzle as they touch his skin. Price and Alana were right: he really is going to be ill.

The fear and horror of his situation is now so intense that Will isn't even sure he has the right words to discuss it with himself, and for a few seconds simply slumps against the brick without even attempting to shelter from the rain while frantically working out what's to be done for the best. The most obvious solution would be to try and go back to America, but he doesn't have enough money to get to the docks at Liverpool let alone the fare for an ocean passage. But he *does* have enough for around a week's lodgings, and the thought of that calms him down slightly. He can stay somewhere cheap – fuck it, in a doss house if necessary – then work out a way to raise sufficient funds to get himself home. He could start by selling his belongings. Admittedly Alana and Margot won't want him in the house, but surely they wouldn't stop him collecting his things? Books, clothes, watch; probably it would be nearly enough. The coat and scarf alone would be worth a substantial sum…

But I don't want to sell those, thinks Will, suddenly anguished at the thought. For a few seconds he bites his lower lip, resenting the surge of weakness which is allowing sentiment to cloud his judgement and enticing him to cling onto articles which should really mean nothing to him beyond their market value in a pawn shop. As a compromise he decides that he can sell them *last*…and then sighs out loud because he's well aware that this pointless brooding over the fate of the coat and scarf is merely a delaying technique for an even worse confrontation – which is forcing himself to read the letter that's still lying in wait at the bottom of his pocket. With an effort he makes himself retrieve it and then takes a few seconds to run his eyes over the familiar, elegant handwriting. Oh fuck, his head hurts so badly. He needs to get moving again, to do it as soon as possible: any longer and he's at real risk of collapsing in the filth and abandonment of a back alley, vulnerable to the cold and wet and God knows what else.

Just read it and go, hisses Will to himself. *Just read it then dump it and leave*. It's not like he's unprepared after all: he knows it's going to be a farewell missive. He knew it before he was even told about *The Tattle Crime* publication and the fact Hannibal will have certainly seen this himself during the course of the day simply confirms that whatever's inside the envelope is going to be the final blow of rejection. Although no doubt Hannibal will still be kind about it: *It is with great regret, but in consideration of my social position.* Something like that. Something considerate yet impersonal. In fact Will hopes it is, because something intimate would actually be far worse. *I had an extremely pleasant evening with you*. Oh God, the humiliation of it…if Hannibal actually *thanks* him for last night, as if Will had merely been providing a service.

His eyes are so sore it's hard to focus and make the letters look quavering and blurry; an effect that's heightened by the way the raindrops streak the ink as if tears have run across the paper. His fingers are starting to spasm now, a miserable combination of the cold of the night and the heat of the fever, and he nearly rips the envelope in half while opening it. But he manages it in the end and holds the paper close to his face – partly to decipher it in the

darkness, but also to catch the same faint smell of bergamot from before – and, very slowly, he begins to reads what's written there.

Aspiring minds must sometimes sustain loss. Yet while small minds are tamed and subdued by misfortunes, great minds rise above them.

You know where I am.

*****

In Harley Street Hannibal is in the consulting room, reclining in his chair and gazing pensively at the fireplace as the flames writhe and snap. The crackling noise is not loud but still seems strangely amplified by the stillness and silence of the rest of the house – the servants having been banished for the evening on the grounds that this is a rare occurrence of Hannibal's pensiveness being genuine (as opposed to skilfully feigned in the service of manipulating someone) and his one condition of permitting himself to indulge in such feelings is that no one is allowed to see him do it. Outside the rain is drumming against the window, dyed silver by the moonlight and leaving streaked watery reflections across his face and hands like ghostly shoals, although he makes no move to draw the curtains and banish them.

Spread across the floor by his chair is today's edition of *The Tattle Crime* (perused in lingering detail and already committed to memory) so whenever he glances down he can see Will's face gazing up at him in grainy black and white. Hannibal now allows himself another look at the photograph (wide-eyed and delicate-boned) then slowly shifts his gaze upwards to Freddy Lounds' by-line, at which point his expression hardens. Such outrageous ill-manners cannot possibly go unpunished and the crimes of Mr Lounds are severe and multiple: not merely having the temerity to misrepresent Will's beautiful actions in such a coarse, unenlightened way; but presuming to *dare* to interfere with what belongs to Hannibal. In this respect he was intrigued to see whether Will would act on the insidious priming Hannibal had provided and take matters into his own fair hands where Lounds was concerned, but apparently not – or at least not on time to prevent publication. This, while somewhat disappointing, is not unexpected and Hannibal (who is always several moves ahead in his internal game of chess) is unperturbed by the setback because it simply opens up a new manoeuvre: which is musing over what desperation might end up driving Will to do. Then, not for the first time that evening, Hannibal reflects on the dual imperatives that merge together within this train of thought and which appear to be a recurring motif where Will is concerned: on the one hand wishing to see what heights of dark artistry Will might be encouraged to reach, yet on the other simply wishing to take care of him. Possession one moment and protection the next. Not, of course, that such aims couldn't be occasionally combined. If Will were here now, for example, then Hannibal would wish to gather him into his arms and hold him close whilst simultaneously murmuring words of dark, hypnotic suggestion into his ear.

Mary has arranged a large bunch of winter dapne in a glass bowl on his desk and he now shifts his eyes from the paper to regard this instead as there's something about its pale fragility that reminds him of Will – an impression compounded by the fact its vulnerable appearance is entirely deceiving and the daphne is actually highly venomous. Beautiful yet

deadly. The horticulturist made a solemn speech about it to Mary who imparted it to Hannibal; and who, in turn, allowed the flowers to be placed close to the existing jar of bright yellow jasmine because he likes the contrast of the riotous yet harmless blooms that draw the eye and demand attention while the subtle, lethal dapne lies in wait at its side. He slowly runs his eyes over it once more, admiring how translucent it is: in the rosy glow of the candle light the delicate white petals look as if they're blushing. Like pale skin, flushed and beautiful in the middle of the night, lying underneath Hannibal and trembling in his arms: something so apprehensive and elegiac, yet still fierce and defiant, and completely insensible to the breathless tender longing it inspires.

In fact Will's presence is harder to ignore here than any other part of the house because there are reminders of him everywhere. The small scuff marks across the rug are from where Will traced a pattern on it with his foot, Will's glass is still on the window ledge, and Will's finger prints are traced very faintly across the pane like little gossamer tears. The chair opposite his own is at the same angle when Will last sat there and pushed it away as he stood up. On the desk there are several books which are out of place, but have not yet been neatly arranged amongst their fellows because it was Will who picked them up and dislodged them. Hannibal now narrows his eyes slightly, meticulously recreating the scene: Will lifting his glasses onto his forehead to inspect the miniscule print (near-sighted; possibly astigmatic on the grounds that one of his eyes has a hint of foreshortening when he smiles), the way the frames caught in his hair – a single, feathery tuft on the right hand side – and how quickly he scanned the pages, immediately sifting through the most relevant points. The small frown line appearing at intervals when encountering an unfamiliar German phrase; yet so often still able to guess the meaning. The way he had caught his lower lip lightly between the teeth then gazed at Hannibal over the top of the pages, expression frank and questioning…

There's a sudden loud knock on the door and Hannibal sighs inwardly, not only from irritation at having this pleasantly pining reverie interrupted but also from the realisation that – having dismissed all the servants – there is no option but to go himself (tedious). He briefly considers ignoring it, but then the pounding breaks out again with renewed vigour; the caller having obviously noticed the light in the window and deduced that someone is at home. Hannibal sighs aloud this time then uncoils himself from his chair, amusing himself with the possible retributions that could be administered should the visit turn out not to be urgent…if it were Mr Froideveaux, for example, bleating about some non-existent dilemma.

The night is pitchy black, the warden having neglected to light the gas lamps that run the length of Harley Street, and even Hannibal's excellent vision requires a few seconds to adjust from the relative brightness of the consulting room. The fog is so thick that at first it seems as if no one is there, as if the caller was merely a phantom one. But then he glances down and takes in the pale, haunted face and the large eyes and the slim shivering body that is soaked through from the rain; and he takes a sharp intake of breath in spite of himself, because – *I missed you so badly*, thinks Hannibal, *I missed you more than words can say*. This slight and slender figure. So ethereal looking in the drenched and misty night: like something that's been raised from the floor of the ocean with pearls for eyes and coral for bones and yet still so achingly perfect, even in its extreme imperfection. That went away and roamed free and yet somehow, against all reasonable hope or expectation, has returned its precious self to where it really belongs. Something so wild and wary, so cautious and rebellious; something

that runs on small, quick feet and evades each attempt to pin it down and claim it. And yet despite that, despite all of it...still something that came back.

“Don't leave again, Will,” Hannibal finally says. “You'll want to retreat. You'll want it as the glint of the rail tempts us when we hear the approaching train. Stay here with me.”

There's a beat of silence, and then: “Where else would I go?” replies Will quietly.

For a few seconds they stare at each other as the rain pours down. And then Hannibal holds opens his arms without saying a word; and Will, without saying a word, goes straight into them.

Chapter End Notes

I generally only reproduce the more well-known quotes word for word, so in case anyone didn’t recognise it I didn’t write the dialogue starting “You'll want to retreat…” myself as opposed to shamelessly stealing it from the show, ditto Will’s reply. ~~Even though it’s a really odd thing to say and doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, and all the Golden Globes to Mads Mikkelsen for making some of his weird lines sound so convincing~~. Likewise H’s note is not original but derived from Plato and Washington Irving, respectively.

This chapter somewhat bastardises the discovery of aspirin, but see earlier author notes about the historical accuracy. Anyway I did it for Will because if my S1 memory serves me right he loves him some aspirin.

The Times newspaper report is also not contemporary to the 1880s as implied here, but unfortunately I don’t have enough time for proper research (and am an historical hack) so just grabbed the first one Mr Google gave me and ran off with it.

Finally, on a serious note – I’m sorry if anyone was offended by some of language around mental health in this chapter. Although these words have very negative connotations today, in the 1880s they were seen as legitimate clinical terms and their use here and in future chapters is not intended to be derogatory in any way.

Chapter 12

For a while there's a yearning stretch of silence that's broken only by raindrops drumming on the paving stones and then: "So you did find your way back again," says Hannibal softly. Will doesn't respond, merely droops forward until Hannibal is baring most of his weight – and yet isn't that response enough, thinks Hannibal with quiet gratification: that this is at least one place which can be relied upon to break the fall? In this respect it's neither entirely easy nor natural to relinquish Will for a second time, but with a degree of reluctance he finally lets him go and places a hand on his shoulder to steer him inside. They walk without speaking through the dimness of the hallway and into the consulting room, where Hannibal lights some candles and adds a few more logs to the smouldering remains of the fire. Then he turns round and feels his mood abruptly shift, because the additional light means he's able to fully take in Will's appearance for the first time.

"Who did this?" says Hannibal sharply. He gestures towards the gash on Will's cheek then cups the side of his face, noting as he does so the marked contrast between the softness of his skin and the frantic tension in his jaw.

But Will just stares back numbly, swaying from side to side and blinking very rapidly as if he's finding it hard to focus. Hannibal stares back in turn, beginning to feel the first stirrings of concern as he notes the obvious signs of fever: the unnaturally glittering eyes, the damp unhealthy flush and the generally drained, depleted look that make this current version of Will seem like a sad shadowy effigy of the genuine one. "Will?" he says, more gently. "What happened to you?"

"My head…" replies Will faintly, and then staggers helplessly to the side as his legs give way. Hannibal darts forward to catch him and then, unwilling to let go, hooks his arm beneath Will's legs and takes hold of him properly so he can carry him upstairs. He feels distressingly light, as if his bones are hollow like a bird's, and there's something deeply ominous in the way his head falls back while his limbs hang limply at his side – as if he's used his last remaining resources to get himself to Hannibal and now his strength has finally given out.

Hannibal carefully transports his valuable burden to the bedroom, then removes Will's drenched clothing, wraps him in a soft dry shirt and towels his hair before tenderly laying him down in his own bed and dressing his wounded face with carbolic and cotton gauze (silently vowing the entire time that whoever is responsible for this is going to have the same treatment rained down tenfold upon their sorry heads). Will, if possible, appears even more unresponsive than previously and this is sufficiently concerning for Hannibal to check his pulse at both the wrist and neck and then sharply tap the side of his face to try and elicit a reaction. Will moans quietly but otherwise doesn't respond in any meaningful way and Hannibal's frown grows deeper. Then after a brief internal debate with himself he swiftly leaves the house and strides down Harley Street in order to knock on the door of one of his medical colleagues whom he holds in slightly less contempt than all the rest.

"Apologies for the imposition Dr Grant," says Hannibal when the latter's housekeeper has fetched him, "but a few moments of your time would be appreciated."

“You’re not unwell yourself?” asks Dr Grant doubtfully as he takes in Hannibal’s gleaming eyes and coiled up energy. “You certainly don’t look it.”

“No, it is not me. There is a young man whose condition I would like your opinion on.”

“Of course, most happy to help,” says Dr Grant, secretly gratified to have his expertise sought from the illustrious Dr Hannibal Lecter. “Let me just get my bag and I'll take a look at him. Won’t you wait inside? No? Well in that case hang fire and I’ll be back in a moment.” He bustles into his living room in a rather self-important way, reappearing a few moments later with a Gladstone bag in one hand and his overcoat in the other, before pausing and calling up the stairs: “Margaret my dear I’m going out for a while, don’t worry about waiting for dinner.”

“You are very good,” says Hannibal.

“Well well, love thy neighbour and all that sort of thing. I know you’d do the same for me.”

Hannibal (who would certainly *not* do the same if it could possibly be avoided) smiles non-committedly and says: “I am much obliged to you.”

“Lead on then,” replies Dr Grant, who has always been slightly in awe of Hannibal and overcompensates for it by cultivating an overly brusque and casual manner in an attempt to appear more confident than he really feels (and in turn is completely unaware that Hannibal intuited this within ten minutes of their first meeting and has been exploiting it mercilessly ever since). Hannibal nods in response and then promptly marches off down Harley Street, Dr Grant obediently scuttling behind as fast as he can on his far shorter legs.

“Dear me,” he says when he sees Will. “Yes, he does look very poorly doesn’t he?” He pulls back one of Will’s eyelids and he and Hannibal simultaneously wince at the way his eyes have rolled back in his head revealing only slivers of white. “How old is he?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Is he? He looks younger, poor lad. Rather undernourished too which isn’t going to help.” He places a hand on Will’s forehead to gauge his temperature, and Hannibal finds himself fighting an irrational urge to snap ‘*don’t touch him*.’ “He’s not consumptive is he?”

“No. Certainly no pre-existing symptoms.”

“Thank God,” says Dr Grant sincerely.

“Thanking God is pious,” replies Hannibal with barely concealed impatience, “but I’m afraid is hardly to the purpose. He is going to require somewhat more practical help.”

“Well I have my cups here,” says Dr Grant, beginning to rummage around in the Gladstone bag. “Take hold of his arm would you? Now stop that young man,” he adds as Will, rebellious even when barely conscious, makes a faint groaning noise and swats his hands away. “No need for that. I’m trying to help you.”

“Absolutely not,” says Hannibal in a rather terrible voice. “I will not allow you to bleed him. In his diminished state it could be fatal.”

“For Heaven’s sake, why are you always so opposed? It’s a perfectly acceptable practice.”

“Maybe here,” says Hannibal coolly, “but on the continent it is largely treated with the contempt it deserves. Go to Paris or Munich and see how many medical practitioners still advocate bleeding fever patients.”

“Then I hardly know why you invited me,” replies Dr Grant, now offended.

“Because I am cautious of being misled through wishful thinking.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I want you to confirm my hope that it is not…” Hannibal pauses and briefly looks bleak. “Cholera.”

“No…no I’m fairly certain not; although you were right to get a second opinion. Possibly scarletina, maybe typhus. It’s still early to tell. He looks very drawn; do you know if he’s been under any kind of strain? Any mental agitation?”

“He has, yes.”

“Family is he?” asks Doctor Grant rather uncertainly, glancing at Will’s far softer features in comparison to Hannibal’s own.

“No. A friend only.”

“Good of you to go to so much trouble. You could always take him to the fever hospital.”

“With all the paupers and Workhouse patients? Certainly not. You know as well as I do he would almost certainly die there from filth and neglect. He is going to stay here and I shall take care of him myself.”

“So what’s your intended treatment plan?” asks Dr Grant, secretly determined to pick up any possible tips.

“Ammonia. Coca powder also. And brandy.”

“Stimulants! Rather contrary to the conventional course.”

“Well naturally stimulants. I am hardly going to be giving him barley water and gruel in his current state. Quinine too, of course. I suppose the druggist on Marylebone will stock it; they should still be open.”

“What, now?”

“This very instant.”

“But you can’t possibly go yourself. Don’t you have a servant to send?”

“I’m afraid it is their evening off.”

“But at this hour! It’s not safe. The robbers, the pickpockets…”

Hannibal, who’s privately thinking that he’d like to see the robber who would dare take *him* on, nods appreciatively and says that he’ll keep to the well-lit areas.

“I wish you wouldn’t. There was a terrible murder nearby, barely a week ago.”

“Was there?” says Hannibal politely.

“Besides, that young man shouldn’t be left on his own. I know – let me send my valet for you.”

“Ah, thank you, that would be very kind,” answers Hannibal, feigning surprised gratitude despite the fact he’s been subtly engineering the whole exchange around to this exact offer.

“I’ll have him bring it round,” says Dr Grant, who’s now secretly bursting to get back and discuss the situation with his wife. An ardent yet secret consumer of melodramatic novels, he’s of a rather sensationalist turn of mind and is now convinced that there’s no way the normally phlegmatic Dr Lecter would go to anything like this kind of trouble for a mere friend. No doubt there’s a scandal somewhere; in retrospect Will is almost certainly a family member of some sort. Perhaps even an illegitimate *son* – he certainly looks much younger than 24. Admittedly there’s no obvious physical resemblance but even so…

“If you would be so good,” says Hannibal.

“Yes, of course. I’ll go right now. Would you like me to call again tomorrow?” he adds hopefully.

“Thank you but that will not be necessary.”

“I’ll call by just in case,” says Dr Grant, eager to get to the bottom of what’s promising to be an entertainingly intriguing mystery or (even better) outrageous scandal.

“There is really no need,” replies Hannibal, proceeding to charmingly but firmly resist any further attempts to inveigle access to Will. Dr Grant’s disappointment is palpable, although he finally admits defeat and gathers his belongings before heading off to arrange collection of the quinine. Hannibal frowns at his departing back, then returns upstairs to check on Will. In a rather cruel irony, he looks extremely similar to how he did the last time he was in Hannibal’s bed – flushed damp skin, hair tangling in his eyes, head thrashing across the pillow – only this time from such a very different cause. His pulse is fluttering like a bird and Hannibal frowns all over again, then goes to the washstand and dips a cloth in the water so he can use it to moisten Will’s parched lips. From outside the window, Dr Grant’s anxious footsteps can be heard galloping down Harley Street, echoing plaintively in the silence of the evening.

“See the trouble we are all willing to go to on your behalf?” says Hannibal tenderly, stroking Will’s hair.

In fact Will seems more subdued now and has stopped lashing around in favour of wilting listlessly across the pillow. It gives him the appearance of tranquillity and calm, although Hannibal does not find this remotely reassuring, having seen enough similar cases in the past to know that it is only a reprieve and that the most severe symptoms are yet to come. After attempting to check Will’s pupils again, and sighing at the discovery that his eyes are still rolled back in his skull, Hannibal goes to the desk in his dressing room and writes a note for Mary requesting her to cancel all his appointments for the following two days. Then he goes to his medicine cabinet and begins to quickly and efficiently assemble the various items he needs, mindful the entire time of the necessity of preparing for the worst. Through the connecting door he can hear Will intoning “*I want to go home, I want to go home*,” in an eerie monotonous voice that’s a world away from the youth and vitality of his normal one; and even though Hannibal knows that Will is referring to America, he can’t quite subdue the part of himself that longs to be able to take hold of Will’s hand and reassure him that he already is.

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Exactly as feared the next day brings a dramatic deterioration. Will is now not only scorched with fever, as if his blood itself is on fire, but completely delirious and showing no awareness of his surroundings. Hannibal calmly settles himself in a chair next to the bed and steadfastly remains there, even sleeping in it as needed, in order to be on hand to administer phials of medicine, pipettes of water or, as the day wears on and the delirium worsens, to prevent Will from inadvertently injuring himself in some way. In this respect even a grave illness can’t seem to entirely quell Will’s defiant nature and several grand battles occur in which he tries to fight his way out of the bed and Hannibal has to work equally hard to stop him. Much of the time he seems tormented by some state of viciously pronounced internal terror, and it speaks volumes about its intensity that even in his physically wasted state it’s still enough to make him overcome reasonable body limits and try to escape. At times Hannibal suspects hallucinations based on the way Will’s gaze tracks frenziedly around the room, but most of the time it appears more intangibly derived; as if he’s being wracked by some impulse or imaginative intuition. Then on one memorable occasion Will simply stares at him with eyes that are glassy and unfocussed then screams and screams and screams, struggling like a small fury until Hannibal ends up pulling him against his chest and holding him in place until he exhausts himself and goes still. “I am not going to let go of you,” says Hannibal gently, even though he knows Will can’t hear him.

Having attended countless similar bedsides in the past, Hannibal has seen first-hand how caregivers routinely deceive themselves that their loved one’s condition isn’t really as serious as it looks. As a doctor the refuge of such wilful ignorance isn’t an option for him, yet despite it he still refuses to consider the possibility that Will might die. Dying is something other people do: those who are old and infirm, or dull, or vulgar, or in some other way dispensable and who can slip and shuffle out of the world without exerting themselves to take the trouble of remaining in it. People like Will who are so vital and imperishable, and whose lights burn so brightly and fiercely, don’t just *die*. And if they do then it’s amidst glory and cacophony and they make the kind of splendid ends of which poems are written and ballads sung. They

don't fade away like snuffed candles, they don't go quietly and passively into the dark night – and they certainly don't succumb to fevers, no matter how violent those fevers might be. So even as the days pass and Will grows visibly weaker and more wasted Hannibal continues his treatment regime undeterred; patiently reassuring him through the worst of the delirium and gently consoling and comforting him in the quieter moments. Despite the fact Will shows no conscious awareness of his surroundings Hannibal still contrives ways to engage him – because even when burnt and blackened by fever it is unfeasible that such a bright, beautiful mind could ever be entirely subdued – and reads aloud from newspapers and scientific monographs or, when the light grows too dim to see the print, closes his eyes and recites Lithuanian folk stories, French lyric poems and Italian love ballads before finally reverting to English and calmly reminding Will that this is nothing more than a trial to be endured and that he is soon going to be feeling restored again; if he can only be resolute and bear it just a *little* longer.

Dr Grant, who finally manages to cajole past Mary and steal his way upstairs, is clearly of the opinion that Will's not long for the world and expresses barely concealed surprise that Hannibal is so serenely optimistic. "You should prepare yourself," he says gravely.

"For what?"

"For…well…for the fact he might not recover."

"He is going to recover."

"Yes, but…" Dr Grant pauses and arranges his features into an appropriately solemn expression. "He's extremely poorly."

"Agreed," says Hannibal waspishly. "That is a very astute diagnosis. At any rate I am pleased to see that your expensive medical education has not been wasted."

"You need to prepare yourself," repeats Dr Grant a little more forcefully, unaware that Hannibal is reflecting on what a great pity it is that he can't advise Dr Grant to be prepared for his head and neck to part company from one another if he doesn't learn to keep his pointless opinions to himself.

Dr Grant, in turn, feels his frankness is justifiable, because having achieved his ambition of seeing Will close up and at length he's been reluctantly forced to concede that his illegitimate son theory doesn't really hold up. Will looks more English if anything, and having read Mr Darwin's new theories in some detail Dr Grant finds it impossible to imagine that as vigorous and forceful a specimen as Hannibal wouldn't produce rows of children (whether in wedlock or out of it) with identikit dark eyes and angular Slavic cheekbones – and no doubt all possessed of the same uncanny ability to stare people into submission and radiate superior knowledge without actually having to go to the trouble of opening their mouths to confirm it. Dr Grant now gives a small shudder at the idea of these appalling offspring and decides that if Dr Lecter ever does get married then he and Mrs Lecter are going to have an enormous amount of trouble finding nursemaids with sufficient nerve to deal with them.

"You're very confident in your treatment aren't you?" he adds with a tiny hint of resentment.

“I am. I am always very confident in my prescriptions. More to the point, in this instance I am very confident in the patient.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has unusual resilience,” replies Hannibal succinctly. What he doesn’t add, although can’t help silently reflecting on (and why not, after all, when it’s true?) is: *And I am not prepared to let him go for a second time*.

Once Dr Grant has flounced his way out of the house, Hannibal returns to the bedroom and gently checks Will’s pulse and temperature before moving to the washstand to replenish the jug of water that’s permanently kept by the bed. Will appears delirious again, thrashing around with some energy as he engages in vigorous yet invisible battle with something only he can see, and Hannibal sighs at the sight of it; brooding over the fact that if there’s any fighting to be done then it really ought to be the kind in which the two of them can partake of side by side. And surely, one day soon, it shall be.

“But he *is* eating them,” says Will suddenly in a faint, distressed voice. “Tell Dr Chilton I’m right.”

Hannibal does a double-take on hearing this, then slowly turns round and approaches the bed.

“He *is*,” repeats Will, clawing his fingers frantically against the bedclothes. “I’ve seen it before, I’ve seen it before.”

“How much you see, Will,” says Hannibal quietly. “It is really quite remarkable.”

“Dr Price believes me.”

“Does he?” replies Hannibal in the same soft voice. “How very astute of Dr Price.”

“Ask Dr Lecter, Mr Crawford, *ask* him. He’ll tell you I’m right as well.”

“Yes I am sure he would,” says Hannibal. “Him too.” Gently he smooths Will’s hair out of his eyes then one by one unhooks his fingers from where they’re gripped around the counterpane. Will makes an anguished groaning sound at the sensation of being touched, and Hannibal lifts his hand and kisses the back of it before stoking his face until he calms down and appears to fall asleep. Hannibal watches him silently for a while longer and re-checks his pulse, then leans over and lightly presses his lips against Will’s forehead. “You are a perceptive boy, aren’t you my love?” he says softly. “We may have to try and do something about that.”

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The next day Hannibal recruits Mary to sit watch over Will then hails a cab and takes himself to Scotland Yard. The urgent appeal for solidarity against Dr Chilton combined with the timing of *The Tattle Crime* publication and the gash on Will’s face, means he now has a good idea of what might have happened; and a solution has thus presented itself which can deal not only with Will’s inconvenient insight but also Will’s unreasonable persecution in a way that

is highly satisfactory in both its simplicity and effectiveness. Hannibal gives a small, gratified nod to himself at the thought of it, and then on arrival requests an immediate interview with Jack Crawford.

"I'm very sorry but he's engaged in meetings all day," says the very young desk sergeant.

"Indeed he is," replies Hannibal smoothly, "…with myself. Tell him it concerns Inspector Will Graham and is urgent."

"Yes sir," replies the sergeant, enormously impressed by Hannibal's calmly imposing manner; and proceeds to not only seek Jack out himself, but then personally escorts Hannibal to his office like a deferential one-man cavalcade. Jack looks fraught and careworn, anxiety having dug several new trenches across his forehead and down the sides of his mouth, yet he still looks up with an expression of eagerly hopeful expectancy when Hannibal walks in. *Rather like a dog*, thinks Hannibal contemptuously. He politely refuses any offer of beverages, having already seen and dismissed the ancient tea kettle with a fastidious shudder, then neatly folds his long body into the tiny visitor's chair and pins Jack in place with one of his courteous yet subliminally intense stares before providing a succinct recap of the existing situation with Will.

"So how is he now?" asks Jack after he's heard Hannibal out in respectful silence. "I've been frantic with worry. We all have."

"He is extremely unwell." Jack's face creases with concern and Hannibal leans back in his chair and regards him meditatively. "Yet while his condition is undoubtedly serious I remain confident of a full recovery."

"You are?"

"Certainly I am."

"Well that's a relief," says Jack sincerely, although the anxious crease has still reappeared. "But this business with Freddy Lounds…To be frank Dr Lecter, I hardly know what's going to happen after he *has* recovered."

"No? Well in that case I shall tell you: he returns to Scotland Yard and assists you in apprehending the Whitechapel murderer."

Jack holds up a weary hand to indicate dissent. "I'm not sure it's going to be as simple as that," he adds, then proceeds to describe the altercation with Dr Chilton; and Hannibal listens politely with absolutely nothing in his expression to indicate that he had already intuited the entire thing.

"It is certainly an unfortunate situation," he says when Jack's finished.

"It is. And I sympathise with Mr Graham, I truly do; the last thing I want is for him to end up in an asylum. But he really didn't help himself by running off like that." Jack sighs heavily then recounts the various injuries Will inflicted on Dr Chilton and the keepers – "Oh dear, what a *shame*," replies Hannibal – and then finally waves his hands around in a rather

aimless way before concluding in a gloomy voice: “And if the Home Secretary *did* become involved…”

“No, you mistake me Mr Crawford. The situation is less unfortunate from Mr Graham’s point of view than it is from Dr Chilton’s.” Jack’s mouth falls open in surprise and Hannibal leans forward again in his chair. “What you could hardly have been aware of,” he continues in the same calm voice, “but which I assure you Dr Chilton could scarcely fail to have known, is that from a medical point of view he acted entirely illegally. Not only does The County Asylums Act expressly prohibit the involuntary admission of a patient to one’s privately-owned institution, but *any* forced committal requires consensus from two independent doctors. Either Dr Price or myself should have been requested to provide a second opinion.”

“He dismissed that, though,” splutters Jack. “Said you weren’t impartial.”

“Naturally he dismissed it – because he knew that neither of us would agree with him. And a psychiatric committal is not a court of law; impartiality is hardly as desirable as familiarity with the patient’s mental state.”

Jack gives a low whistle. “But he seemed so confident of his rights.”

“No doubt. But nevertheless the law is very clear. It was established in response to the high number of false incarcerations in asylums and by attempting to take Mr Graham under the circumstances he did he was in complete violation of it. I suggest you tell him that you are prepared to overlook it in return for him agreeing to overlook,” Hannibal smiles slightly, “Mr Graham breaking his nose.”

“But he threatened to go to the Home Secretary.”

“He won’t,” says Hannibal serenely. “This whole situation has been whipped out of perspective in the frenzy of the moment. What Mr Graham did in America occurred within very clear extenuating circumstances and involved a reprehensible individual who, it *could* be said, received his just retribution. Besides he told me himself that he was cleared on medical grounds – an insanity plea was never raised and therefore the whole question of his mental competence is irrelevant.”

“Yes, but if the Home Secretary…”

“Do not trouble yourself about Mr Matthews. I happen to know him personally; we met at the Pontevedrian Embassy in Paris and he has dined at my home several times since then. I shall intervene with him if necessary.”

“You would do that?”

“Certainly I would. But it is *not* going to be necessary, because I wish to propose another solution.”

“Which is what?” asks Jack cautiously, as if he can’t quite believe a resolution might be possible.

“Simple – I shall supervise Mr Graham myself. I already have a thorough knowledge of the investigation and am prepared to accompany him to Scotland Yard and provide input in an investigative and medical capacity. In that way public and political opinion shall be satisfied and in turn I can prevent the case being overly influenced by any of his more…imaginative excesses.”

“Oh yes, good lord; you’ll hardly believe this Dr Lecter, but he actually had some outlandish theory about cannibalism. Seemed to think that the first Ripper – because he’s adamant there are two – is taking organs with a mind to consume them.”

“How interesting.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Of course that is not the same as saying it is plausible. On the one hand I have a great amount of respect for Mr Graham’s intelligence and acumen; yet on the other, there is no doubt that on the day you last saw him he was seriously unwell.”

“Dr Price seemed to think he might be on to something.”

“And he may well be. Yet it is also easy to hypothesise all manner of conjecture after the fact. And from what I have seen so far of Mr Graham suggests to me that he is at his best when intuiting contemporary evidence.”

“Rather than retrospectively analysing cold cases,” adds Jack, and Hannibal shrugs elegantly in a *‘you said it not me’* gesture. “At any rate I certainly wouldn’t argue with that. What he was able to glean about the Tate murder was rather extraordinary.”

“Which is entirely to purpose; the focus needs to be on the current series of crimes because the threat to the women of the East End is immediate and tangible.”

“Agreed,” says Jack firmly. “And I was *extremely* unhappy with the whole cannibalism angle. I mean imagine if the newspapers got hold of it.” He gives a small shudder at the thought.

“Quite.”

“And it would certainly be a solution. Better than Dr Chilton’s – illegality aside – because he’d be supervised permanently. You’d be there all the time to keep an eye on him.”

Hannibal gives Jack one of his Sphinx-like smiles and then stretches his long legs out in front of him. “Exactly,” he says.

“So we’ll have the two of you working the case,” adds Jack, looking cheerful at the idea of it. “I rather like the thought of those odds.”

“As do I,” replies Hannibal. “As collaborations go I think it may be rather…productive.”

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Hannibal makes a detour on the way back to Harley Street to visit his favourite perfumer and purchase some pastilles to burn in Will's room (which of course is really his own room, although he's surprisingly content to transfer ownership), and then to the druggist for high-strength opium lozenges (in the event of future headaches) and thereafter to the pharmacy for wafers and French tonic wine (to keep Will as hale and beautiful as realistically possible) and in the end doesn't return home until late afternoon. To avoid drawing Mary away from Will's bedside he neglects to ring the bell and lets himself in instead, only to be confronted with the sight of her in the hallway; rather pink in the face and hurriedly assembling shawl and bonnet.

"Oh sir!" she says as he comes in. "Sir! Thank heavens you're back, I was just about to find a messenger to come and fetch you. Mr Graham has woken up. That is to say his fever appears to have broken; he's been lucid for a good half hour."

"*Really?*" says Hannibal. "You are quite sure?"

"Oh yes sir, absolutely sure. He was a little incoherent at first but he's been getting clearer and calmer all afternoon. He's been asking for you."

Hannibal gifts Mary with one of his exceedingly rare genuine smiles (not that she's ever able to tell the difference, given how convincing the manufactured ones always manage to be) and swiftly takes himself upstairs where he finds Will sitting up in bed looking wan, bleary-eyed and, Hannibal decides, somewhat self-conscious. For a few seconds they simply stare at one another, exchanging unspoken acknowledgement and recognition, and then Hannibal smiles again and Will smiles back. Mary has obviously put him into a new nightshirt and in his current state the white fabric swathes his thin frame. He now gives the collar a rueful tug.

"Suitable invalid wear isn't it? It looks like a shroud."

"Yes, I suppose it does rather."

"Must keep the undertakers happy – at least it saves them a job."

"Well at any rate I am glad you are feeling better," says Hannibal with an impressive level of understatement.

"How long has it been?"

"Just over a week."

"God, that long? Really? I thought you were going to say a couple of days."

"You have been dangerously ill. Nevertheless my confidence in you was clearly not misplaced; I felt very strongly that you would recover."

"Oh," says Will, briefly nonplussed because he's so unused to people expressing confidence in him that he's not entirely sure what to do with it. "Did you?" He gives the collar another absent-minded tug and Hannibal smiles fondly at the sight of it.

"I did."

“I'm sure your treatment had more than a little to do with it,” replies Will, rallying slightly.

Hannibal gives a modest shrug (the merest elegant curl of the right shoulder), then folds himself into the chair by the bed and regards Will meditatively. Will, in turn, rolls onto his side and gazes back, his face cupped under his palm like a child. He’s so pale his face is barely distinguishable from the fabric of the pillow. “Has anyone been here asking about me?” he finally asks; not because he thinks they have but simply because it’s something to say – and surely he has to say *something,* as he suspects it might be rather inappropriate to just lie there in silence staring into Hannibal’s eyes. “Dr Chilton…anyone like that?

“Not at all. I don’t want you to exert yourself with the details now, but you should know that I have spoken with Jack Crawford and you have nothing to be concerned about where Dr Chilton is concerned. When you are fully recovered you may return to Scotland Yard as before.”

Will frowns at this, making a visible effort to force his mind back to the agonies of the final evening before he was ill, and Hannibal watches him the entire time; admiring the shape and colour of his eyes now they’re no longer glazed and lifeless with fever. If one were painting them it would require a blend of Delft blue and Payne’s grey to capture the shade. “I don’t understand,” Will finally says. “How can it have been sorted out?”

“Please don’t trouble yourself – you must focus on regaining your strength. I promise I shall describe the conversation in full to you another time, but for now take my word for it that there is nothing for you to be concerned over.”

Will frowns again then rubs his palm against his forehead as if struggling to process the information before finally turning back to look at Hannibal. “You did that for me?” he says quietly.

“Of course.”

“And this as well…a whole week in your house. You’ve gone to so much trouble.”

“It was no trouble, Will. I don’t, and never have, perceived you as a source of inconvenience.” He reaches out and lightly trails a finger across the ridge of Will’s cheekbone. “I was happy to do it.”

Will looks a bit overwhelmed at this, as if unable to bear the force of feeling, then dips his head down and mutters: “I don’t really know what to say.”

“Then say nothing.”

“Thank you. I won’t forget this…what you’ve done.”

“I shall do far more if you will allow me to,” replies Hannibal softly. Will gazes wordlessly back and when Hannibal leans over once more to stroke his face he not only doesn’t pull away but closes his eyes and leans contentedly into the touch. *Like a piece of sculpture*, thinks Hannibal admiringly. Something chiselled by an expert hand with infinite love and patience, then displayed in a courtyard so the marble feels warm and sun-kissed beneath the

fingertips. In fact in this respect he has no qualms in acknowledging a temptation to begin administering certain pharmaceuticals in order to keep Will weak and listless for just a *little* longer – not least because as soon as he's recovered he's going to leave. Nevertheless while Will might be aesthetically rather pleasing when pale and delicate he's undeniably more interesting when fiery and agile, and after a brief consideration Hannibal is obliged to concede the obvious benefits of restoring Will to complete health as quickly as possible. *Grow fierce and strong again as soon as you can my love*, he thinks as he runs his eyes over Will's face. *I have such striking plans for us*. Out loud he merely says: "The medicine I prescribed you previously; you should resume taking it within the next few days now the fever has passed. I have a supply of it here."

"If you think it's best," replies Will. Yet even as he's nodding compliantly what he neglects to add is that Alana's warning about possible contamination is still fresh in his mind and he remains resolved to follow her advice and experiment for a period without it. The willow bark is still in his coat pocket in the event of a headache, after all – and no doubt Hannibal has even stronger sedatives and painkillers to hand should they be required. Nevertheless he doesn't want to appear like he's questioning Hannibal's judgement, so merely thanks him and announces his intention of taking it as soon as medically advisable. There's a large aspidistra on the bedside table so he could easily just pour the drops into the soil every evening – it looks like it could do with livening up, he's practically doing it a favour. And it's not like Hannibal will ever know.

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Over the next few days Will continues to rally and before long is able to get out of bed unassisted and move around with relative ease. Hannibal in turn (having always relished the opportunity for solitude and silence afforded by an empty house) is not fully prepared for how swiftly and sincerely he is able to adapt to Will's presence; to the extent he even finds himself musing over it while seeing patients, allowing his mind to wander as to what exactly Will might be doing and (more specifically) how soon Hannibal will be able to track him down and watch him doing it. Nevertheless, he remains fully aware of how paranoid and wary Will continues to be – hardly surprising given his recent experiences – so is careful not to overwhelm him too soon and maintains a respectfully chaste distance. In this regard, and despite Will's protestations of removing himself, he has taken to sleeping in the spare room and insisted on Will remaining in the master bedroom. Will bites his lip and looks awkward but finally agrees, and Hannibal smiles internally and bides his time because he is fully prepared to wait; and is quietly confident that the wait is not going to be excessively long. There's even a certain pleasure in it because if anything Will's current unobtainability enhances his value, like jewellery preserved in glass cases rather than groped and fumbled over in trays on the counter. Ever mindful of the long game, Hannibal instead limits himself to softly innocent caresses and gentle touches, relishing how Will begins to increasingly respond to them – leaning into the pressure, arching his back, closing his eyes…*exquisite*, thinks Hannibal – and after a week or so seems to be waiting rather hopefully for them and reacting almost voluptuously when they appear. No, thinks Hannibal to himself…really not that long at all.

In the interim he concentrates on building up Will's strength and takes a quiet yet significant amount of satisfaction in feeding his boy: pheasant fragrant with lemon and rosemary, salmon

garnished with asparagus and swimming in wild garlic mayonnaise, hot roast pork and cold cuts of ham, platters of oysters with whipped butter and rye bread, foamy beer and rich wine, chicken soup with thyme and cream that's simmered from raw bones, and stacks of macancinis bursting with truffle and cheese that leave Will delicately licking the oil from his fingers with his small pink tongue in a way that seriously tests Hannibal's self-control. Will appears touchingly grateful for the attention and gradually begins to flourish under such extravagantly devoted care: losing the shadows under his eyes, regaining the lost weight, and generally acquiring an air of energy and liveliness that has been absent for so long that the sensation no longer feels particularly familiar – like relearning to use a wasted limb.

Hannibal also remains mindful of the fact there's the revelation of his new role at Scotland Yard to be disclosed (and the inevitable protestations to be weathered) so he bides his time once more until Will is strong enough to begin contemplating a return to work, before finally sitting him down and explaining the situation.

"Oh Christ," says Will when he finds out. "It's like having a *nanny*."

"Yes," replies Hannibal serenely. "I suppose it is."

"I don't know why you're sounding so pleased with yourself – considering you're the nanny. You should add it to the plaque on your door: '*Dr Lecter, esteemed medical practitioner and jobbing nursemaid*.'"

Hannibal smirks to himself then on an impulse catches hold of Will's hand and tugs him onto the sofa, manoeuvring him round until his head is on Hannibal's lap and he can stroke his hair. Will mutters something mutinous and Hannibal gives one of his curls a gentle tug. "Is this admissible?" he says. Will makes a growling noise and Hannibal smirks again. "Or should I retire and leave you to sulk in private?"

"I am not *sulking*," says Will with dignity.

"No, perhaps not. Tantrum might be a better word. How would one create the necessary participle I wonder? To tantrumate?"

"I know you think you're hilarious but you're not. Sorry to break it to you."

"And do *you* know," says Hannibal thoughtfully, "that in England it is widely considered part of a nanny's prerogative to discipline their tantruming charges by putting them over their knee and spanking them."

"If you ever tried that…" Will pauses, trying and failing to devise a convincing threat; Hannibal smiles beatifically. "Don't you *dare*," says Will.

"If you insist, beloved," replies Hannibal in an exaggeratedly sincere tone.

"Oh God." Will stretches his arms behind his head so Hannibal can wrap their fingers together. "You're *unbearable*."

"Yes, I dare say."

“I’m going to tell Mr Crawford I want a less obnoxious nanny.”

“You are of course perfectly free to do that; although there is always the chance he could replace me with Dr Chilton.”

“True. Ugh. Imagine being nannied by that.”

“Not that I would permit it of course. If Frederick Chilton ever tries to put his hands on you again,” Hannibal pauses leisurely, “then I would slice them off.”

“Good,” says Will, “I’d help you. We could have one each. Although given his crappy awful theories about handedness I really ought to have the left…Can I have the left?”

“Remember my previous observance on whether or not one ‘can’?”

“Oh God, yes, whatever. *May* I have the left one?”

“You may,” says Hannibal with a long, slow smile which Will, in his current position, is unable to see.

Will closes his eyes contentedly and stretches his arms further behind his head. “Seriously though,” he adds after a pause, “the situation might be frustrating but I do appreciate your help. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome. Although as diverting as this conversation is proving to be I must insist it draws to a close and that you take your beautiful, exhausted self to bed. You are practically falling off the sofa.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are not. You require some rest.”

“Are you actually giving me *advice*? You told me you'd reached the end of your tether with that.” Will grins and then adopts a wickedly accurate approximation of Hannibal’s accent. “’*You are without a doubt the most tiresome patient I have ever had*.’ I thought you’d given up trying to tell me what to do?”

“I may have given up,” replies Hannibal, “but I still have some standards left. Go to bed. And if you do not I shall *carry* you.”

Will, who’s actually feeling more depleted and drained than he really wants to admit to, grudgingly concedes defeat and hauls himself upstairs, clutching onto the bannister at intervals when he’s certain that Hannibal can’t see him do it. The housemaid has changed the sheets during the day and the bed feels fresh and inviting; but sleep proves elusive nonetheless, and Will finds himself lying in the darkness while staring at the ceiling and twitching with what can only be called frustrated desire. As a piece of self-awareness this is almost as difficult to admit to as the physical weakness (because surely it could be considered an emotional one?) and it’s undoubtedly delving into an urge that’s painful and unfamiliar and therefore not something he particularly wants to dwell on. He finally drifts into a restless sleep around midnight, but is woken several hours later by the start of a violent storm which

seems determined to rip the sky into pieces: cracks of lightning, growls of thunder and the wind howling like a wolf. Will isn't typically bothered by storms, although the ferocity of this one is rather absorbing and in the end he gets out of bed and wraps himself in one of Hannibal's sumptuous housecoats so he can stand by the window and admire the roiling clouds, purple as a bruise, and the jagged lightning bolts that slash across the skyline like streaks of simmering silver. The reflections of numerous faces in the windows of the houses opposite, open-mouthed and ghostly pale in the moonlight, indicate he's not the only one whose rest has been disturbed and attention seized, and there's something about knowing most of the street is also awake which instils a sense of agitation – as if some latent drama is brewing and he can't be the only one to fall asleep while it's playing itself out. At any rate sleep is impossible now. Feeling restless, he resolves to read for a while and sets out to try and hunt out some matches for his candle.

Once downstairs, Will realises that he doesn't actually know how to accomplish this admittedly simple task because he has no clear idea of where to look. The consulting room is always locked during the night, and while the kitchen would be an obvious place Will doesn't fancy his chances of negotiating those twisting stone stairs without a light to guide the way. At random he tries another small door in the hallway, which is also locked, and by its placement to the kitchen stairs assumedly leads to a cellar of some kind. Will frowns at this, because it seems rather strange to go to the trouble of installing such a hefty lock to the entrance of a cellar…although perhaps it's used for storing valuables – silverware for example, or even artworks – in which case maybe it's not so strange after all. The next door he tries takes him into the drawing room, which although he's never seen before still retains a certain familiarity in the sense of completely fitting his expectations for the kind of tasteful opulence he associates with Hannibal: deep rich colours intermingled with bold prints, lots of stained glass and damask wallpaper, plush satin hangings, a long velvety sofa whose cushions are so plump they look as if they've been inflated with a bicycle pump, and even a large piano brooding in the corner whose keys are gleaming in the moonlight like teeth. He quickly locates the matches in a carved Byzantine box by the fireplace, and is just pausing to admire a ferocious yet beautifully rendered sculpture of what looks like one Hellenic warrior preparing to devour the vanquished body of another (although surely it's not *really* that…is it?), when he glances up and sees Hannibal standing in the room where seconds ago was nothing but empty space. It's rather as if he's materialised in the interval between the flares of lightning, and the effect is so eerie that Will gives a violent jump and nearly knocks the sculpture off its plinth.

"Jesus, you startled me," says Will, rather unnecessarily. "How can you move so quietly? I should put a bell on you."

Hannibal gives a thin smile, but instead of acknowledging this merely nods towards the sculpture and says, "Beautiful isn't it?"

"It is," agrees Will. "Very striking." The room is briefly illuminated by another lightning flash, and he peers closer in order to read the inscription at the bottom. "*Mortifer: Oderint dum metuant*. 'Bearer of death: Let them loathe so long as they fear.'"

For a very, very slight second, Hannibal's eyes narrow as if he's been caught by surprise.

“Bit morbid,” announces Will matter-of-factly.

“I didn’t know you could read Latin,” replies Hannibal after a pause.

“I can plod through it to an extent. I had three years of it at school.” But Hannibal doesn’t respond, just continues to stare with an indecipherable expression on his face, and Will finds himself descending into a familiar plunge of awkwardness despite not really understanding why (is admitting to three years of shit Latin *really* such a monstrous social gaffe?). For want of anything better to say he gestures towards the piano. “And I didn’t know *you* could play.”

Hannibal smiles again, only this time it seems a bit more benign, and replies: “I likewise plod when the inspiration takes me.”

“Do you?” asks Will, overcome with a sudden surge of curiosity. “Would you play something for me now?”

“If you wish,” says Hannibal, even as Will is opening his mouth to apologise for making such a bizarrely-timed request. He moves over to the piano (how *can* he walk so silently?) and draws out the stool, looking thoughtful for a few moments before bringing down his hands and coaxing out a melody that’s both haunting and elegiac yet with an unmistakable *frisson* of passionate energy that darts around like minnows at the rippling high notes before seamlessly blending into the yearning pulse of the lower register. Will doesn’t know anything about musical theory but can still recognise high technical accomplishment when he hears it (especially given that it was all drawn from memory without reference to a score of any kind) and has to resist the impulse to frantically applaud when it’s over on the grounds that such an action might appear gauche and over-eager. “Beautiful,” he says instead, rather fervently. “What is it?”

“It is not anything in particular. A self composition.”

“You wrote that yourself?”

“I did.”

“*Really?*” says Will, somewhat overawed. “That’s very impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“It was…” Will hesitates slightly, trying to think of the right way to capture the ambience of the piece. “There was so much depth to it. So many layers. It had a lot of soul.”

“Did it? How very interesting.” Hannibal smiles sardonically. “Given that I am generally considered to be somewhat soulless.”

Will is now unsure of whether he’s being gently mocked or not, but decides to persevere regardless. “Well you must have a soul,” he says, nodding towards the piano. “Because I think I just heard it.”

Hannibal glances up at that and gives him another indecipherable look before moving towards the sofa and coiling himself onto it; at which point Will realises he’s started to feel

awkward again and begins to shuffle from one foot to the other. “You don’t have to stay up with me,” he says. “I feel fine, I only came down to get some matches.” There’s still no reply and Will’s awkwardness begins to be supplanted with irritation at the sustained silence. “I’m going back to bed again soon myself,” he adds. But Hannibal merely continues regarding him with the same unreadable expression and Will finally feels his patience expire. “Well good night,” he says a bit defiantly, then checks he has the matches before moving towards the doorway.

“That piece of music,” Hannibal says abruptly, and Will immediately stops and turns round. “You are quite correct in your assessment about the layers.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes. It blends several strands of feeling. Loss. Remembrance. Renewal. It was partly inspired by a family member of mine; although not solely that, because such a thing would mean it was rooted in the past alone and it is not. Rather it also combines future potential and future aspiration; *hope*…I suppose one might call it that. The desire of anticipation and believing in the beauty of one’s dreams and intentions. Of vision and imagination.” Hannibal tips his head back slightly as if to perceive Will from the clearest possible vantage point and Will stares back, completely enthralled and unable to look away. Outside the storm is still raging, the thunder pulsing like a cosmic heartbeat, yet he’s acutely aware that the spectacle has suddenly lost its power – subsumed, as it has been, by the much bigger conflagration that’s on the verge of crackling into life within the room.

“I experienced several of those imperatives during the time you were ill,” Hannibal continues. “Consensus medical opinion suggested you could not possibly survive, but I knew you were going to come back to me – and once again I was prepared to wait for as long as necessary.”

“Yes,” says Will quietly, even though he’s not entirely sure what it is he’s agreeing to. Perhaps it’s more like a general sense of harmony; of native synchronicity and natural accord.

Hannibal, in turn, smiles at the confirmation then leans forward slightly; and even though it’s the most inconsequential of movements it still makes Will tense as if preparing himself for conflict. *Fight or flight*, he thinks, a bit wildly; and of course Hannibal immediately notices and the faint smile grows fractionally broader.

“How wary you are Will. Why is that?”

“I don’t really know,” says Will truthfully.

“No? And yet, as always, you remain where you are and weather the storm; quite literally in this case.”

“Yes,” replies Will with a smile. “I suppose I do.”

“Certainly you do. And yet do you remember when we discussed your recovery? You dismissed the part your own tenacity played and emphasised my contribution at the expense of your own – and in that you were mistaken. Yes, I fought very tirelessly on your behalf, but

only because your resilience makes you worth fighting for." Hannibal leans even further forward, never once taking his eyes off Will's face, and this time Will takes a step forward too without even realising he's doing it. "In this respect," Hannibal adds softly, "I still don't think you fully understand how hard I would fight to keep you. My determination to do so is greater than any trials or conflicts that might lie ahead of us; it is stronger than any disputes we might have, or arguments we may engage in, or hostility we might evoke. There is no expanse of space or stretch of time or distance that can overcome it and it is larger and fiercer and finer than any barriers that might attempt to come between us. If I were to survive for a hundred years then I would be willing to fight for you in every one; and if I were to live for a thousand then I would fill the entirety of them endeavouring to claim and retain you. Do you see it now Will? Do you understand? I would fight to have you as long as there is life in me, and if there is life beyond death then I would fight for you still." What he also thinks, but doesn't add, is: *You made me long for you contrary to my entire sense of myself, then conquered and subdued me without even trying – yet I can't bring myself to resent you for it.*

There is a long silence and when Will finally speaks his voice sounds unfamiliar to his own ears: dark and resonant, unusually intense. "Yes," he says. "Yes…I think I understand."

Hannibal stares back calmly, his angular face occasionally illuminated by the crackles of lightning through the window. "Come here," he says quietly.

Will walks towards the sofa like someone in a trance until his legs are touching the tip of Hannibal's knee, and Hannibal takes hold of his wrists and pulls him down onto his lap so Will's back is pressed against his chest then enfolds him in his arms with a grip that is tender yet possessive. "I'm not sure you really do *mylimasis*," he adds softly, straight into Will's ear. "Not entirely…not altogether. The pieces have not yet been fully arranged on the board. But one day – and I suspect that day is not too far off – then the time shall come where you can consider yourself to *truly* understand."

"You think so?"

"I do. And in the meantime here we are."

"Here we are," agrees Will, rather dreamily.

"So are you going to let me know you?" Hannibal slides his palms down Will's chest and begins to unknot the belt of the robe, doing it very slowly to see if Will is going to object; and then, when he doesn't, slips it down over his shoulders. "I am your doctor now after all," he adds caressingly. "That makes it my right to examine you…explore you. To discover everything you have to show me. Are you going to let me to do that?"

"Perhaps," murmurs Will. He lets his head tip back so it's resting against Hannibal's shoulder, then quivers at the sensation of warm lips brushing against his temple. "Perhaps I might. Only you're going to have to work for it; to *earn* it. You know that don't you?"

"Of course. And rather delight in the knowledge – after all, part of the pleasure in the reward comes from the effort of attaining it. You would not be half so enticing if you were not so… intractable. So very rebellious aren't you? My little *Kratos;* the war deity and warrior. 'William' means resolute, a protector and keeper of the land. Did you know that?"

"Yes."

"And *are* you a warrior?" He runs a light, leisurely finger over the gash on Will's cheek. "You certainly have the battle scars for it."

"I am, yes."

"*Yes*. So tell me, Will, what are you going to fight for? What are you going to defend?"

Will closes his eyes and arches up against Hannibal, letting his legs fall wider apart and twining his arms behind his head so he can tug on Hannibal's hair. "I don't know," he says rather breathlessly. "I think I'm still deciding."

"Of course you are. And in the interval here you are with me; mindful of the fact you have given me full permission to explore you. Only I shall have to be patient, shan't I, given that the examination I am *most* intrigued by," Hannibal's hands move to briefly cradle Will's head, "is the one that is hardest to obtain. But you know I am willing to wait; and in the meantime there is enough to study to provide ample consolation." Will's breath hitches as he feels Hannibal's hands begin to trail downwards once more, briefly gripping his shoulders before skimming across his chest and then finally dipping his thumbs into the hollow of Will's hipbones. "How perfectly constructed you are Will," says Hannibal, almost thoughtfully. "Your anatomy is exquisite. The length of bone and slenderness of limb; the firmness of muscle tone balanced by all these smoother contours. The softness of your skin… the sheer *aesthetics* of you. You are a true canon of artistic proportions. *Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio*: Leonardo's Vitruvian Man. Imagine my private rapture had you first come to me in a medical capacity rather than a forensic one. How should I have been able to control myself?"

"Mmmm, I don't suppose you would," says Will breathlessly. "Oh God, please, just… *please*."

"Please what; what are you begging me for? Would you have pleaded with me like this if you had first presented yourself as my patient? What do you think? Perhaps you would, although not straight away. I expect you would have been wary and unsure to begin with: standing in my consulting room and gazing at me from underneath your hair with that small frown line in between your eyebrows. Resenting the fact you were obliged to be there, and resenting me for being the arbiter. It is not so very implausible you know; foreign nationals are often required to submit to medical examinations when recruited for public service. Jack Crawford didn't do that with you, did he? I suppose he was concerned about what they might discover. How remiss of him; especially considering that, courtesy of Mr Lounds, we all know anyway."

"And you *really* don't care, do you?" says Will, enlivened by this sudden realisation.

"I do not. I do not care now and I would not have cared then. Had Jack Crawford sent you to me with that knowledge then I would have regarded you while in full possession of it – and I would not have cared."

"I *know*," says Will arching his back almost ecstatically.

“Good – you ought to know it. And yet I still have a job to do, don’t I? A duty to perform. I have to examine you and pronounce you physically and mentally fit for service – and you standing there resenting me the entire time. Although of course there is a procedure for these kinds of things and so I would have had to explain what I needed to do, then discreetly drawn the curtains and asked you to strip for me. You would have been embarrassed wouldn’t you? You don’t understand how beautiful you are. You would have taken your time over it, flushing with self-consciousness and trying to prevaricate for as long as possible. All in vain of course; but at that point you wouldn’t realise how patiently I am able to wait. And yet here we have an interesting situation – because you are so perceptive, and no matter how much I tried to hide it you would still be able to see the admiration in my face. And you would immediately appreciate that wouldn’t you? You yearn so badly to be seen and celebrated and accepted. So even though you’d still be glaring at me, I would know that the rather charming flush on your cheekbones was no longer from embarrassment alone, but also from the first stirrings of desire.”

“Oh yes…*yes*,” says Will, not even attempting to deny it. He’s starting to feel vaguely unhinged with the heady, exhilarated longing of the whole thing: eyes welded shut, breathing ragged and frantic, his entire body a kaleidoscope of sound and motion. Helplessly, hopelessly, deliriously lost in the sensation…and suspecting that maybe it’s all too much except for the awareness that it’s also nowhere *near* enough.

“So now I am close to having you where I need you to be,” says Hannibal in the same hypnotic tone. “But of course I couldn’t inspect you while you were standing, so I would have told you to bend yourself over my examination table. You haven’t seen that yet have you…I shall have to show it to you some time. At that point I wouldn’t ask you to spread your legs apart – although I can’t help imagining that you might have done it anyway. And then I would have put my hand on the small of your back when I leant over you; partly to provide reassurance, but also, I confess, because I would want an excuse to see if your skin is as soft and velvety as it looks. My palm would probably have felt quite cool and it would have made you quiver. *Try and relax Mr Graham*, I would have said; but of course you cannot relax, because by now you would be growing quite frantic with anticipation.” Will obligingly gasps at the thought of it, and Hannibal quickly slides a finger into his open mouth. “Make it as wet as you can,” he says softly. “That’s it; good boy. Most doctors don’t use any kind of lubrication but there is no need to hurt you unnecessarily is there? Pain is a precious commodity, not something to be simply squandered. And I would be able to tell just by looking at you how tight you are going to feel.” He moves his hand downwards again, using the other to tilt Will’s hips forward, and Will gives a low moan as he feels a long finger slide deep inside him. “Yes,” says Hannibal caressingly, “it is exactly as I supposed. So tense; a clear sign of inexperience. And yet so pretty, and with a little practice more than receptive enough for pleasure. Would you have been trembling in the way you are now? Rocking your hips back against my hand? I rather suspect you would. *This little patient of mine is becoming so excited,* I might have thought. *He needs me to take care of him*.”

“Oh yes, oh fuck…*fuck*.”

“So beautiful Will,” says Hannibal. He withdraws his finger and rubs in exquisitely slow circles, expertly stroking and exploring before pushing deep back in again; and Will gasps helplessly as he feels a flush of wetness across his abdomen where he’s leaking a stream of

pre-come over himself. “I would be giving myself away now, wouldn’t I?” Hannibal adds in a soft, intense voice. He kisses his way down the side of Will’s face and then tugs on his earlobe with his teeth, smiling slightly at the resulting gasp. “There is no conceivable way that this could be for medical benefit; its only clear purpose is to give you pleasure. And so much pleasure already, you hardly know how to bear it – despite the fact we have scarcely even begun. I wonder how are you going to feel when we make love for the first time?”

Will moans again and then angles his neck into a painful twist in order to reach Hannibal’s mouth, pillaging hungrily as if his life depends on it and roughly clawing his fingers against Hannibal’s neck and shoulders. He’s planted his feet against the rug in order to give himself better leverage for thrusting his entire body against Hannibal’s; and Hannibal now neatly brackets his ankles around Will’s so that when he moves his legs apart Will’s are forced wide open too. “You know, it is rather perfect seeing you this way *mylimasis*,” adds Hannibal reverently, trailing his hand up and down Will’s ribs. “So beautiful. Vulnerable. Desperate. All those lovely noises you are making; they might be the sounds of distress as much as desire. And the way that you’re writhing and shuddering against me you could almost be struggling; like something fragile and breakable fighting for its life. I would have to keep clinging onto you through the final throes, wouldn’t I; hold you in my arms until you grew silent and still? And yet there is *so much* life in you.”

“Don't stop,” gasps Will, somewhat helplessly. “Just...oh please, *please.* It feels so good.*”*

“I know my darling. *So* good. And so forbidden. But you don’t care about that do you? You’ve never really cared. You’ve been surrounded your entire life by people who reward you for being something you’re not, yet all the time yearning for the pleasures of what is illicit and prohibited. You long for it don’t you? It *consumes* you. You knew it every time you cast off morality and obeyed your instincts. You knew it when you were in America, and you know it right now. And you know that I can show it to you.”

Will now simply moans in response and Hannibal strokes his hipbone with his free hand while rhythmically rubbing his cheek against Will’s. “So close to the edge now my love,” he says softly. “And merely the smallest push required to send you spinning over the side. It is a paradox isn’t it? You know I can teach you all about physical pleasure, help you discover how good your body can make you feel; and yet it is *far* more than just that. Isn’t it Will? You want to know the type of pleasure that mind and soul can attain – you want to feel the desire first hand. It’s what you’ve *always* wanted; to venture into the shadowy places and bring something back.”

“Oh God…*God*…Hannibal…” Will moans again and frantically pivots his hips downwards, exposing his throat so Hannibal can scrape his teeth across it. He can’t fully take in the meaning of the words, can’t separate anymore between the feverish cacophony in his head – *so* loud, loud enough to drown out the storm – and the rapturous swell of desire in every part of his body; every cell, every fibre, every drop of heated blood. He can feel how achingly hard he’s started to become, his cock growing slick and heavy against his stomach, and it that frenzied moment knows that even though neither of them have touched it he’s going to come anyway. He doesn’t even fully want to – doesn’t want to lose control in such a spectacular way – and the inability to do anything about it instils a combination of something like desperate humiliation spiced with ecstatic, needy abandonment. *Please don’t make me*, he

longs to say, *I can't bear it, please don't*. The truly unnerving thing is that it's not even something that's fully physical, as opposed to swelling and spilling over within a frantic and fervently over-heated mind…and Christ, it shouldn't even be possible. Then he can feel Hannibal's teeth digging into the fragile skin of his neck and, oh fuck, he's actually being *bitten;* and then: "Oh *God*," gasps Will, sounding slightly panicked. "I can't…I…I'm going to…Oh God, *fuck*. Oh...*oh* I'm coming, oh God I'm coming, I'm coming…I…"

"Oh *Will*," says Hannibal reverently, with a sigh so low it's almost a hiss. "Perfect: just look at you. Look how beautiful you are." He wraps his arms round Will's chest to hold him through it, kissing his throat and murmuring praise and encouragement the entire time; and then, when Will has finally stopped shuddering, neatly taking hold of his shoulders and manoeuvring him round so they're facing one another. Will slumps forwards and buries his face in Hannibal's neck, and Hannibal retrieves the robe and enfolds him in it then presses his lips against his forehead.

"Breathe Will," he says quietly.

"I can't, it's…it's just so…"

"Just breathe with me."

"Oh God it's so *much*…" says Will eventually.

He sounds overwhelmed, and Hannibal is entirely aware that he isn't talking about the physical sensation. Instead he pulls Will even closer and brushes his face against his hair. "You're beginning to understand now aren't you," he says softly and it's a statement; not a question. "And how it hurts you. But remember, Will: to constantly renounce and disavow one's true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict. It requires a degree of audacity to examine oneself…and considerable fortitude to tolerate the pain that results from the knowledge. But it is far preferable – far more profitable and admirable – than the agony of constant, mindless denial."

There's a long pause and then: "I know," replies Will, so quiet that Hannibal can barely hear him over the rolls and lurches of thunder. "I know, I know, I *know*."

*****

In another part of London, not far from the Whitechapel hospital, someone else is also awake. Like Will he too is untroubled by the storm and the violent shrieks from the sky don't warrant so much as a turn of the head as he sits on the edge of his narrow iron bed and stares fixedly at the wall opposite. The room is not only small and cramped but heavily stained from the residue of multiple previous occupants; cast adrift with a pervading, disfiguring air of squalor and desperation that saturates everything from the dripping walls to the blighted doorframe to the rotten wormy wood of the skirting board. It is the type of room that is beyond saving, the only realistic chance of improvement being to demolish it and begin again afresh; but just like the jagged tongues of lightning beyond the broken window pane, his surroundings are a source of neither interest nor concern.

The moonlight, though pale and watery, and the lightning, though intermittent, add some much needed illumination to the wretched room, which at present is lit only by the spluttering wick of a single greasy candle. Unlike Hannibal's this is not expensive white tallow but rendered from pig fat and so fills the air with the stench of scorched flesh. But while doubtless objectionable to many, to him it's another source of disinterest – just one more thing not to notice. Why waste time with such trivia when there are so much more important matters at hand?

Specifically, the more important things refer to The Wall, upon which his eyes are currently fixed and which is covered from floor to ceiling with clippings that he's meticulously cut from the daily papers and pasted up one by one with horse glue. He's read them so often he knows most of them by heart, but it's still energising to see them there: talisman and witness bearers, every single one. Beneath The Wall is The Box, the only item in the room which is well made and well cared for, although there is no need for it or its content quite yet and so for the time being it remains undisturbed. Instead he flicks his gaze over The Wall, the skittering eyes the only sign of movement in an otherwise rigid face as he takes in the newest addition: *Setting a Monster to Catch a Monster* by Freddy Lounds.

Inspector Graham looks somewhat distorted in the wavering candlelight: almost as if the eyes within the photograph were twitching and rolling, staring back and exchanging silent recognition. Not that he *really* believes that of course; only a madman would think such a thing were possible. But it hardly matters anyway, because sooner or later the time will come when he and Inspector Graham are going to be coming face to face for real. *Eyeball to eyeball*, as the novelists say. For a fleeting second, his mouth spasms into a smile: just the faintest gleam of teeth that catch the candlelight before retreating again into the dark cavernous mouth.

Another peal of thunder splits the sky but he still doesn't look round. Why should he care when there's a far larger storm coming? No one else knows the extent of it yet except him but they'll find out soon enough. And then how sorry they'll all be! Quivering and wretched, flinging themselves to the floor and cowering. The teeth briefly reappear as he smiles at the thought of it. And then…then how they'll *marvel*. How they'll look at him and despair. A true tempest; an *explosion*: grander and far more terrible than anything insipid Mother Nature could produce – glorious and merciless and a lifetime in the making.

But that's for the future and in the meantime there's still work to be done. So he reluctantly drags his eyes away from The Wall and stands up, oblivious to the screaming of the rusty bed springs as he removes his weight from them, then goes to the broken-down dresser and locates a sheaf of paper and a pen. The paper is yellowing round the edges and blotted with spots of grease and the ink is brown and curdled with age, but what does it matter as long as both are still fit for purpose? And then he sits on the three-legged stool and begins to write: arduously scratching out one letter after another until the work is complete and he can carefully fold the paper in half, then in half again, and then slide it into the parcel which is already waiting. The latter is larger than it needs to be, the contents being swaddled in several layers of cotton and cardboard, but it's a necessary precaution to avoid suspicion. To only think if the parcel was intercepted before it falls into the right hands…

Impatiently he shakes his head. Such doubt is weakness. Worse than that: *faithlessness.* It implies his own anxieties are more prescient than the guiding force which has steadied his hand and strengthened his purpose and taken him all the way to where he is now, with The Wall and The Box, and allowed everything to occur exactly as it needs to with symmetry and purpose. Of course the package will find its way. In fact the only thing left to do is write the address and he does this now, inscribing it slowly and carefully so that there can be no possible mistake: *Inspector Will Graham, Scotland Yard, Whitehall Place, London*. *FOR HIS URGENT ATTENTION*.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> Hey my lovelies, sorry in advance but it's unlikely there'll be an update this Saturday. To be honest I've been losing confidence with this fic for a while and my Writing Mojo* finally threw its hands in the air last week and lay down on the sofa with cigarettes and drunk vodka straight from the bottle. And then it had a hangover. But now it, me, and Sassy Victorian Will have had a big group hug and are back in business. Woo! So don't worry - I would never leave this unfinished and am hoping to be back on track with it again before too much longer. In the meantime, many thanks for your patience and huge appreciative Victorian hugs (without side effects) to everyone who's left positive feedback. I still feel very inexperienced with creative writing (plus without a doubt am my own worst critic) and an ambitious story like this can get discouraging at times – so the support really has meant the world to me and kept the enjoyment, Hannigram muse and motivation factor all ticking overtime :-) See you again ASAP!
>
> * Technical literary term

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a long time Will doesn't say anything further; not knowing, after all, what else there is to possibly say. Silence ultimately seems preferable, so instead he just stares wordlessly into the darkness as Hannibal's hands skim up and down his spine and the rain thrashes against the window to form an eerie kind of lullaby – trying so hard to think about not thinking that it's as if his mind simply turns in on itself and he ends up falling asleep in Hannibal's arms with his face pressed against his shoulder. Hannibal gently lifts him up and lays him on the sofa but Will doesn't stir; so after covering him with the robe Hannibal straightens up and leaves him to sleep, moving away from the window as he does so in order that the moonlight can stream in and illuminate Will's face without his own shadow blocking it. The flickering silver accentuates the very faint dusting of freckles, like the speckled centre of a tiger lily; yet while the haunted, elegant pallor and tangled coils of hair are somewhat reminiscent of de Ribera's *Saint Sebastian,* the sculpted cheekbones and passionate mouth are all Will's own. The storm is still raging outside, frigid iron-grey clouds scudding past the moon and the thunder snarling and roaring in counterpoint to the crackles of lightning, but it's still not enough to disturb him. *Sleep while you can beloved*, thinks Hannibal tenderly. *Restfulness becomes you; and you are going to require all your strength for what lies ahead*. Then, as the night proceeds and the temperature falls, he finally picks up a still-sleeping Will and carries him into the bedroom where he lies down at his side and mentally sketches the way he looks when lit by the smouldering remains of the fire: how the sheet drapes over his hips, the plane of each collar bone, the curve of every rib, and the sensuous sylph-like way he curls his body across the bed. *Nymph, in thy orisons, Be all my sins remember'd* quotes Hannibal admiringly to himself. Charcoal would probably be most suitable to capture the softer contours; gently smudged around the edges with the thumb to imply latent movement, with the stark contrast

of black and white suitably blended to signal vulnerability combined with a nuance of dark ferociousness. He notes that Will frowns at intervals, as if his dreams are troubling him, and can't help but reflect on how frustrating it is that there are still places Will can roam to which are beyond Hannibal's reach. Although not, admittedly, beyond his influence. Not entirely… not altogether. Hannibal smiles very faintly to himself then smooths Will's hair out of his eyes, stroking his face and murmuring snatches of the same lyrics and poetry he used to comfort him during the fever. Will moans softly to himself in his sleep, and Hannibal's smile broadens.

"The night is darkest before the dawn *mylimasis*," he says quietly. "Remember what I said to you when you were ill? The situation is not so *very* different after all: the fevered trials of self-knowledge and self-acceptance." Then he runs a deliberating finger across Will's forehead and repeats his own words of the week before: of how this is nothing more than a trial to be endured, and that Will is soon going to be feeling restored again if he can only be resolute and bear it just a *little* longer.

*****

Will sleeps straight through the night and wakes up next morning with his head on Hannibal's chest and a pervading sense of self-consciousness that he appears to have rested better than he has in recent memory simply by virtue of Hannibal being in the same bed. The sheets are pulled up so far that only a few tufts of Will's hair are visible; and Hannibal watches with a degree of amusement as it gradually begins to move around in silent indication that its owner has woken up.

"Morning," Will finally says from beneath the bedclothes.

"Good morning."

The hair begins to shift back and forward in a slightly confused way. "What time is it?"

"Nearly nine o'clock."

"That late?"

"Yes, you slept very well," says Hannibal with the tiniest hint of smugness.

"Mmm."

"There is coffee here if you care for some. The post also – a letter for you in Jack Crawford's handwriting."

"Post? Oh fuc…for goodness sake," replies Will, slowly absorbing the implications of this. "You mean Mary saw me in here?"

"She did not. She knocked on the door and received no response so left it outside along with the coffee. Although I guarantee that even if she had seen you she would have made no reference to it."

This statement immediately reignites Will's previous agonising regarding Hannibal's insistence on discreet domestic staff and which, combined with the propensity for "charming company" observed by the man at the opera, he's now convinced refers to a string of illicit lovers coming and going at all hours. *Although mostly coming*, amends Will with a slight smirk.…*oh Christ that's not funny. Shut up*. But really, what else could there be for someone as illustrious and respectable as Hannibal to be cagey about? A part of him wants to ask 'so – how many other people have you had in here?' but he can't quite bring himself to; not least because he isn't really sure that he wants to know the answer. And besides, maybe it doesn't even matter that much after all; because isn't he the one who's here right *now*? Will has a sudden (not entirely unappealing) image of himself banishing competing suitors like something from a medieval ballad; or, less dashingly, one of the American pulp magazines which always feature lantern-jawed men fending off love rivals with a combination of assorted weaponry and righteous outrage. Although that would admittedly cast Hannibal in the role of passively simpering love object which as an analogy doesn't work very well. In fact it doesn't work at all and, as analogies go, might fairly be considered to be on a level of shitness that's positively *epic*…

"Do you intend to come out from there at any point?" asks Hannibal, ruffling Will's hair.

Will makes a grunting noise in lieu of a response but still emerges from beneath the bedclothes and buries his way beneath Hannibal's arm, using his hand as a cushion to protect his face from all the angular bones in Hannibal's shoulder. Unfortunately this means that his palm has to bear the brunt of them instead, which isn't an entirely satisfactory solution. "Your collar bones are awful," says Will eventually after trying and failing to get comfortable. "It's like lying on a sack of *spanners*."

"Oh dear," replies Hannibal leisurely. "What a shame."

"Well it is. Can you pass me that cushion? No, no – the other one. Thanks. Oh, and the letter as well."

"Anything else? Or will that do?"

"That'll do for the moment. Actually no, I'd like some coffee please. Would you get me some coffee?" Hannibal rolls his eyes and complies. "And can you draw the curtains now you're up? It's too dark to read."

"What a tyrant you are."

"Yes, I suppose so," says Will cheerfully. "I wonder what Mr Crawford wants?"

"You must open his letter and find out." Hannibal pauses to briefly inspect it before handing it over. "There is a rather elaborate 'TTT' insignia on the envelope just here; what does it stand for?"

"The Thames Taskforce."

"Oh? I assumed it was The Tiny Tyrant."

“Remember what I said about you not being anywhere near as hilarious as you think you are?”

“Of course – I simply ignored you. I have a paper knife on the desk if you want it?”

“No,” says Will ripping the envelope open.

“A tyrant *and* a savage.”

“You love it you liar. By the way, how does he know I’m here?”

“I told him when I went to Scotland Yard. He is aware of how ill you’ve been.”

“Hmmm,” says Will, suddenly fretful at what feels like an abrupt reminder of the issue of accommodation that’s still waiting to be faced. It’s unfeasible, after all, that Alana and Margot will want to have him back; but he can hardly stay here indefinitely.

“What is the matter?” asks Hannibal who’s watching him carefully.

“Nothing.” With an effort, Will forces himself to stow this worry away until a more convenient time and returns his attention to the letter. “Mr Crawford says they’ve begun holding weekly strategy meetings about the Ripper case.”

“I thought they were already doing that?”

“Yes, but those were according to speciality; this is ‘multidisciplinary’ so everyone will be there. He says that I’m welcome at the next one…” Will pauses and frowns. “Which incidentally is today.”

“So soon. You feel well enough?”

“I think so,” replies Will, slightly hesitantly. “Anyway, I’ll have to face them all eventually. I suppose you need to go too?”

“Yes. You shouldn’t be overly concerned about that by the way. Jack Crawford and I have written to the Home Secretary to appraise him of the situation, but unless there is a substantial public outcry then I am of the opinion – and Jack agrees with me – that it would be better for morale at Scotland Yard to demonstrate complete confidence in you by keeping the nature of the arrangement private. For the time being, as far as all your colleagues are concerned, I am merely there in a consultation capacity in the manner of Dr Chilton.”

“That’s good,” says Will, cheering up slightly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. What time is the meeting?”

“Eleven o’clock, so we should probably get moving.” Will gets out the bed, shivering slightly in the frigid morning air, then flexes his shoulders like someone limbering up for a fight. “Can I borrow one of your shirts? They’re nicer than mine.”

“If you wish. Although they will probably be a little large for you.”

“My own are too large for me. I’ve lost so much weight.”

“True…I shall have to continue feeding you up, won’t I?”

“Not too much,” says Will, pulling the shirt over his head. “I still need to be able to run away from Dr Chilton.”

“On the basis of what Jack Crawford told me,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely voice, “it is Dr Chilton who ought to be running away from you. Speaking of which, I suppose you wish to arrive at Scotland Yard separately?”

“*Definitely*.” Will sits back down on the edge of the bed and begins to fasten the shirt cuffs, oblivious to how intensely Hannibal is staring at him. “You get a cab and I’ll walk there. I could do with some exercise.”

“You know it is raining?”

“I’ll be fine,” says Will firmly.

Hannibal who, like a cat, loathes getting wet is actually quite content with this solution although can’t help but be struck by how fierce and resolute Will has become when faced with the undeniable ordeal to returning to Scotland Yard. He turns to him now and runs a considering finger over his cheekbone. “So very eager to begin hunting again?” he says softly.

Will pauses and frowns, inadvertently allowing his memory to begin skittering over the conversation – if that’s really the right word for it – from last night. *Yearning for the pleasures of what is illicit and prohibited…It’s what you’ve always wanted; to venture into the shadowy places and bring something back…To constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict.* Here in the sunlight, with the sounds of London streaming in through the window it seems faint and unreal, like an encounter that was experienced (endured?) by someone else. And yet, and yet…

“I’m ready,” is all he says. And Hannibal smiles into his coffee cup and says nothing.

*****

Jack Crawford folds his hands complacently in front of him and revolves his eyes around the table in a rather intimidating way. Behind his head Queen Victoria gazes out of her portrait with matching intensity and between the two of them the effect of smug officialdom is somewhat overwhelming; several people shift uncomfortably in their seats. “I’m sure most of you already know our new medical consultant,” announces Jack after a pause. “His reputation of course precedes him – but if you’re not acquainted already, then you shall be before too much longer. Gentlemen: presenting Dr Hannibal Lecter.”

Hannibal yawns internally and then gifts the assembled faces with one of his most inscrutable Mona Lisa smiles. With the obvious exception of Will (currently looking charmingly mutinous) it’s such a very *drab* assortment of faces too: ploddingly slow and solemn and

bristling with sanctimonious self-importance, despite having very little to show for it. Really, it's hardly surprising that Jack the Ripper has remained at liberty for so long with this uninspired crew in pursuit: none of them look capable of catching so much as an omnibus.

"*Delighted*," says Hannibal with lavishly fake sincerity.

"As are we," coos Jack, who now seems perilously close to batting his eyelashes; Hannibal's internal yawn becomes so pronounced it nearly dislocates his jaw. "It's an *honour* to have you on the team."

"Yes indeed, welcome aboard," says Price. He gives a warm smile, then abruptly turns his head at the sound of someone noisily clearing their throat.

"Dr Lecter of course joins our *existing* medical consultancy," Jack adds after a slightly awkward pause. The same throat clears itself with even greater gusto than before. "And I'm sure Dr Chilton will be glad to have a little lightening of his duties, given how much we've already imposed on his busy schedule."

"Oh, one naturally does what one can," replies Dr Chilton in an excessively magnanimous tone. "They always say, after all, that the busiest people are the ones who can most easily find the time."

"They also say that too many cooks spoil the broth," adds Hannibal with a little smile. "It may be that so much medical input is surplus to requirement."

"Oh my *dear* Dr Lecter." Dr Chilton opens his eyes very wide and places his hand on Hannibal's forearm in a rather patronising way. Hannibal looks down at the hand in vague surprise; Dr Chilton surreptitiously removes it. "Don't devalue your contribution, I *beg* you. I have no doubt that whatever insights you can share will be enormously valuable."

"Thank you," says Hannibal gravely.

"And of course I'd also like to welcome back Mr Graham," adds Jack. He says this in the manner of an afterthought, as if to subliminally impress that the two occurrences are unrelated, and Will notices this tactfulness and is thankful for it. Jack turns to him now and gives a brisk nod. "It's not been an easy few weeks with you being ill and the more libellous excesses of the tabloid press. But we're very glad to have you back with us."

"*Very* glad," says Price kindly.

"But that statement implies that it was all untrue." Dr Chilton wags a playful finger in Jack's direction as if he's being deliberately facetious. "I mean – libellous, Mr Crawford? *Libellous*?"

"As opposed to making verbal accusations," says Will politely. "Which is slanderous, Dr Chilton. *Slanderous*."

"I never did understand the difference between the two," muses Zeller.

“It’s much the same,” replies Price, “and for efficiency’s sake means that Mr Graham can sue *The Tattle Crime* and Dr Chilton together.”

“Dr Price will have his little joke,” says Dr Chilton venomously, “but I hardly see that it’s a laughing matter.”

“But it’s potentially a litigious one,” replies Will who, primed by Hannibal, has already rehearsed his line of response. “Freddy Lounds not only exaggerated the entire thing, but implied that what I did was the result of some kind of moral degeneracy when in fact I was completely cleared on medical grounds. Both the judiciary and the doctors agreed that anyone with a similar condition could just as easily have done the same thing.” Which is technically true…except that not just anyone *would* have done it. Very briefly Will’s eyes meet Hannibal’s in silent confederacy before he looks away again.

Dr Chilton blinks a few times, obviously unprepared for such a coolly assertive reaction and at a loss as to where the previously tractable, frightened version of Will can possibly have gone. Will stares back boldly and in the end it’s Dr Chilton who drops his eyes first.

“Well now we’ve got *that* out the way,” says Jack quickly, “I’d like to return to the purpose of the meeting: establishing current progress *vis-à-vis* the Ripper murders. And which, I hardly need remind you, can be summarised in two words.”

“Bugger all,” says Price under his breath, at the exact moment as Will mutters “jack shit.” Zeller, sat in the chair between them, goes slightly pink with the effort of trying not to laugh.

“Two words,” ploughs on Jack. “*Urgent priority*. I want ideas! Suggestions!”

“This is hardly a meeting to organise the church raffle Mr Crawford,” says Price waspishly. “I think I speak on behalf of us all when I say that we’re already doing all we can.”

“And it’s not enough is it Dr Price?” snaps Jack. “Because if it was then the so-called Ripper would be on his way to the Old Bailey by now with a bag over his head rather than running round the East End and terrorising it to his heart’s content.”

“Then what would you propose Mr Crawford?” counters Price. “What are *your* ideas and suggestions?”

Hannibal, who’s positioned himself in a corner seat to furtively observe Will without anyone being aware that he's doing it, now gives another internal yawn at this tedious exchange and subtly shifts his gaze in order to admire how stunning the latter is looking today despite his obvious tiredness and irritability. At any rate the rainy walk to Scotland Yard hasn’t done him any harm, bringing a bit of colour to his pale cheeks and obliging him to slick his wet hair off his face in a way that displays the exquisite bone structure to full advantage. It's hard to resist the temptation to begin reimagining the way he was last night in every possible detail: falling asleep on the sofa in Hannibal's arms before allowing himself to be carried upstairs and then awakening this morning so focussed and resolute. Frustrating to now see him trapped in this wearisome setting amid such drab and uninspired individuals; rather like some exotic bird of prey confined in a cage with a gaggle of pigeons. With a small sigh Hannibal forces himself to stop admiring Will and neatly transfer his attention back to the conversation.

“We need *initiative*,” Jack is now saying. “What we’ve tried so far has been unsuccessful. We’re going to have to come up with something *new*.”

Hannibal, who’s now so bored it's almost physically painful, finally decides enough is enough and that something is going to have to be done before this appalling meeting fulfils its threat of rumbling on indefinitely and they all expire from old age. What though? Oh yes. He briefly closes his eyes and locates mental copies of several newspaper clippings, then compares the dates and performs some rapid calculations before flicking his eyes back open and observing languorously: “I would suggest the time has now arrived for a greater police presence in the East End.”

Will glances up sharply at this; and Hannibal is opening his mouth to clarify *exactly* why it’s a good time before changing his mind and closing it again on the grounds that it would be far more interesting to see whether Will is going to make the link himself.

Dr Chilton, secretly resentful that he didn’t suggest this first, gives a condescending little laugh. “Needle in a haystack I’m afraid, Dr Lecter. We couldn’t possibly afford the kind of manpower such an initiative would require. An area that size for weeks, or possibly months, on end – just on the off chance of catching him on the right night?”

“It would naturally need to be planned with certain *temporal* factors in mind,” replies Hannibal serenely.

Will, who’s been frowning into space during this exchange, suddenly snaps back to life and brings his hand down onto the table with an emphatic banging noise. “Oh yes, of *course*,” he says. “Mr Crawford, think about the timing of the Tate murder.” Hannibal nods approvingly. “Remember how I said that he was escalating? There’s a gap between each killing – a kind of cooling off period – and then he comes back with even greater ferocity than before. Well the cooling off is *over*.”

“What on earth do you mean?” demands Dr Chilton. “Surely the attacks are random?”

Will shakes his head impatiently. “No, the timing is critical. God, of course; we should have worked this out before. He’s going to strike again – soon.”

“I don’t know sir,” says one of the CID officers uncertainly. “It doesn’t sound terribly plausible to me – looking for meaningful patterns in a maniac’s behaviour?”

“We’re on schedule for a new one,” repeats Will firmly. “It absolutely makes sense to cover the area.”

Price, who’s begun thumbing through the papers in front of him, holds up a hand for silence before giving a low whistle. “Dr Lecter and Mr Graham are right,” he says. “Tate, relative to Meadows, relative to Taylor…in fact if anything he’s *over*due.”

“An obvious police presence would scare him off,” says Dr Chilton irritably. “He’ll just go somewhere new and we’d have achieved nothing.”

“He won’t go somewhere new,” snaps Will. “The East End is his hunting ground; he’s going to stick with what he knows. But you’re right about an overt police presence. What we need is subtlety...”

“A deceptive operation!” pipes up a very young sergeant. “Officers going under cover!”

“As what?” asks someone else. Will and Zeller exchange a covert glance and then stare fixedly at the desk top as if they’re struggling not to laugh.

“As punters?” suggests the young sergeant in a hopeful voice.

“Absolutely *not*,” bellows Jack. “Sergeant Matthews, have you taken leave of your senses?”

“No sir.”

“Oh? Because I thought I just heard you suggest that officers of Scotland Yard should go sauntering around Whitechapel pretending to hire prostitutes.”

“Well they would only be pretending,” says Price reasonably.

“All right, but what about simply dressing down and acting like locals?” perseveres Sergeant Matthews, reluctant to abandon the plan. “They don’t need to proposition the women, just keep an eye out for anyone acting suspiciously.” Jack flounders for a few seconds and Sergeant Matthews, sensing weakness, pushes his advantage. “Mr Graham could do it for starters.” He turns to Will before adding admiringly, “You're very good at observing people, aren’t you sir?”

“He can’t,” says Dr Chilton nastily. “That accent of his would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“I’ll have to disguise it then won’t I?” replies Will in pitch-perfect cockney, at which point Dr Chilton purses his lips with irritation and Zeller gives a not-very-discreet snort of laughter.

“I think it’s a good idea,” says Price. “At any rate no one’s come up with anything better. I’ll go too. Mr Zeller?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well naturally I’d be happy to volunteer my services…” begins Dr Chilton doubtfully with a glance at Jack.

“Certainly not! I absolutely *forbid* you or Dr Lecter to go. As external consultants I can’t allow you to do anything in which your safety isn't completely guaranteed.”

Hannibal narrows his eyes at this, but Dr Chilton flutters his hands around and says, “Oh well, in that case far be it from me to argue…” at which point there’s a sudden knock on the door and everyone glances up with irritation at the interruption.

“Apologies for disturbing you sirs,” quavers the elderly porter, who’s just shuffled in and is looking rather abashed at the row of annoyed faces, “but a parcel has arrived for Mr Graham. Marked urgent.”

“Well bring it over then,” barks Jack.

“Thank you,” says Will, smiling kindly at the porter.

Jack scowls and rubs a hand over his face. “All right then,” he says once the porter’s shuffled out again. “I can’t say I’m particularly happy about this because of the risk involved, but on reflection I agree that it’s a potentially promising strategy. However, you three stick together at all times. I don’t want to hear any nonsense about one of you running off gung-ho up an alleyway.”

“My running days are over,” says Price. “Although how does one contrive to run gung-ho? Is that just an elaborate way of saying fast?”

“It means *irresponsible*,” hisses Dr Chilton.

“Upon my word Frederick,” says Price in an excessively polite voice. “You really are a perfect *shrew*.”

“I resent that,” replies Dr Chilton, inflating his cheeks like an outraged bullfrog.

“Don’t resent it,” says Price cosily. “It’s by no means the most objectionable analogy I could have devised.”

“There are far worse animals to be compared to,” agrees Zeller. There's a brief pause and everyone looks at him expectantly as if awaiting examples.

“You mean like an ass?” offers Sergeant Matthews, trying to be helpful.

“Certainly an ass would count as worse,” says Zeller in a thoughtful tone. “A dog too. Or a pig.”

“A rat!” suggests Sergeant Matthews who’s now getting a bit carried away.

“I was called a mongoose once,” adds Will innocently.

“Oh, well, a *mongoose*,” says Price. “There you go Dr Chilton – take your consolation where you can. In comparison the shrew could be considered the most lovable of all the rodents.”

“What's a mongoose?” asks Sergeant Matthews in a loud whisper.

“We could volunteer in shifts Mr Crawford,” offers a burly detective, eager to be part of the action. “A different group each night.”

“Well naturally you'll go in shifts Inspector Brent, don't be ridiculous. The three of them can hardly cover the whole of Whitechapel singlehanded.”

“Is it American?” says Sargeant Matthews to Zeller in the same loud whisper. “A bird? Like those bald headed eagles they put on everything?”

Will's lips twitch slightly and he darts a look at Hannibal before deciding that the two of them are now exchanging so many eye-meets it's getting a bit ridiculous. What if someone notices? Dr Chilton, for example, who despite pervading idiocy seems to exhibit the occasional inconvenient flares of insight at other people's expense. He deliberately shifts his gaze to the desktop and concentrates on trying to fight his way into the parcel, which is so securely fastened that gaining admittance is proving something of an ordeal.

"I shall do my best to trundle down the backstreets," Price is now saying. "Not unlike an old carthorse in fact. You see Dr Chilton? Nothing wrong with the occasional simile courtesy of our animal friends."

"This is no laughing matter," says Jack severely. "I'm making sure all three of you receive pistols. It's one thing to be cracking jokes in the middle of Scotland Yard and quite another to come face to face with Jack the Ripper in some godforsaken bit of Whitechapel."

"If that happens then I shall hide behind Mr Graham," says Price. "Hopefully the Ripper reads *The Tattle Crime* and will realise that the wisest course of action is to run gung-ho back down the alleyway himself."

"*Jesus*," says Will abruptly.

He doesn't raise his voice, but there's a shocked intensity in his tone that's so pronounced the entire room immediately falls silent. "What's the matter?" asks Jack, jolted into alarm by the expression on Will's face. Hannibal leans forward in his chair; even Dr Chilton looks a bit subdued. "Mr Graham?"

Will takes a deep breath and then stares at Jack over the top of his glasses before wordlessly holding out the contents of the parcel: a heavily blotted piece of paper and a stained cardboard box. His hand is completely steady, but there's a powerful surge of fear coursing through his body and it feels as if every single hair on the back of his neck has just stood on end. Rather wildly he remembers the first time he saw the 'Dear Boss' letter; the revulsion, the shock…and how faint and anaemically insincere the reaction now appears compared to *this*.

Jack frowns and takes the letter, skimming through it and then going slightly pale. "My God," he says quietly.

"What's happened?" asks Price sharply. "What's in that box?"

Jack glances at Will, who nods then leans back in chair as Jack clears his throat and begins to read aloud for the benefit of the whole room. It's now so eerily strained and silent that his voice seems unnaturally loud; sonorous and echoing as if to amplify the nightmarish quality of the words.

From hell.

Mr Graham.

Sir.

I know that you came to London with a special purpose – you were sent here to catch me. I know you expect to be successful.

I also know that you are not like the others. This pleases me. It is only right that the man sent to hunt the hunter is distinctive.

Like me you have been misrepresented in the newspapers so I know you will understand. When I show myself to you then you will understand fully.

To prove that I am who I say, I send you half the kidney I took from one woman – preserved for you. The other piece I fried and ate, it was very nice. I may send you the bloody knife that took it out if you only wait a while longer.

Signed

Catch me when you can Mister Graham.

Will, who has now gone very pale, briefly catches Hannibal's eye once more then stares fixedly ahead as the room stutters back into life.

"Oh my word…oh lord, oh lord," says Sergeant Matthews in a frightened voice.

"Pull yourself together Sergeant," replies Jack mechanically, even though a tense muscle has begun to twitch in his jaw. "Now is not the time for hysteria."

"Surely just a hoax?" stammers Dr Chilton. "A medical student perhaps? They would have easy access to…to a kidney."

"Unlikely," replies Will. He retrieves the letter from Jack and brandishes it in front of Chilton, who shrinks back as if the paper itself is sentient and dangerous in some way. "Look how he's signed it."

"But he hasn't."

"Exactly. A hoaxer would have signed himself 'Jack the Ripper.' The fact he didn't is very significant."

"But you can't possibly…you don't really think?" falters Inspector Brent, who's gone chalky white beneath his beard.

"Yes," says Will slowly. "Yes I'm afraid I do."

"May I?" asks Hannibal who, apart from Will, is the only person that seems to have remained in control of themselves. Pushing back his chair he moves round the desk and picks up the box before holding it to the light and running an expert eye over the contents. "Definitely

human," he says after a pause. "Taken from the left-hand cavity; and from the size most likely female. Dr Price?"

"Agreed," replies Price in a shaken voice.

"Dr Chilton?"

"Yes," says Dr Chilton without actually looking.

"Did any of the victims have their kidneys removed?" asks Hannibal, getting straight to the point.

"Yes," replies Price hesitantly. "Marianne Taylor. But she died some time ago. It couldn't possibly have lasted intact for so long."

"That is not a disqualifying factor; the odor of spirits is quite clear. Until recently it has been preserved, as the writer says."

"Good God," says Jack, briefly dropping his guard and allowing his discomposure to filter through.

"Indeed," replies Hannibal crisply. "It would appear that the stakes have just been raised." He slowly runs his eyes over Will with an unreadable expression on his face.

But Will doesn't reply, being too preoccupied with reconstructing a conversation that he'd forgotten about in the midst of so many recent trials and distractions, but which is now repeating itself in full force. Being accosted outside Scotland Yard; the thin pale face and obsessive voice: *I read all about you when I was in Baltimore. I know about you. And then I read about you in the London papers and having you here in the same city for a second time…Do you believe in fate Mr Graham?* Frowning slightly he re-reads the letter. "Obviously someone who's literate," he says after a pause.

"And yet possibly unused to using a pen," adds Hannibal. "See how cramped the writing is and the way the ink is blotted?"

"Always with the contradictions," mutters Will, half to himself. "Educated yet has no penmanship; functional yet deranged; chaotic yet cunning…"

"And socially isolated yet with a yearning to be taken seriously by you," says Hannibal with the same indecipherable expression.

"Well one thing's for certain," interrupts Jack, who's growing impatient with what he considers a pointlessly philosophical exchange. "Under no circumstances are you going out into Whitechapel tonight."

"What? Whyever not?"

"Is that an attempt at *witticism* Mr Graham?" Jack is now speaking with exaggerated clarity, enunciating each word as if dictating to a half-witted secretary. "This maniac knows who you are."

“Exactly. It might draw him out.”

“Will Graham!” thunders Jack, abruptly losing his temper, “if I see you anywhere near Whitechapel after dark then you're on the first boat back to America.”

“But sir, this is…”

“The first boat! And I’ll walk you up the gangplank myself.”

“No Jack, Mr Graham is right,” says Price. “Be reasonable. I understand that you’re concerned for his safety – as are we all – but it could be an ideal opportunity.”

“I am not using an officer of Scotland Yard as *bait*,” snaps Jack.

“Who said anything about bait? We’re hardly going to be displaying him on a plinth in the middle of Whitechapel with a *Hello Jack!* placard round his neck and a come hither expression on his little bearded face. But consider – if he’s in the area and the Ripper sees him, he’s almost certainly going to try and initiate contact.”

“Under a pretext of course,” adds Will. “He’s not going to reveal himself immediately; or at least he *thinks* he won’t.”

“But you’d know him if you saw him?”

“I believe if he spoke to me for long enough then he’d give himself away, yes.”

Jacks, obviously conflicted, scowls to himself for a few moments while chewing his lower lip and taking the occasional surreptitious glance at the letter, the box and – more particularly – the box’s tragically macabre cargo. The others wait in assorted degrees of restiveness: Will drumming his fingers impatiently on the desktop, Dr Chilton folding his arms and radiating superiority, Price staring beadily at Jack, and Hannibal observing everyone with his usual blankly inscrutable interest. Jack, sensing the nervous tension that’s saturating the room, finally lifts his head and frowns all over again at the assembled faces. “All right then gentlemen,” he says heavily, “this is what we’re going to do. Officers Brent, Matthews, Mayhew and Turner.” He jabs his finger at each one in turn. “All four of you are coming out tonight with me to survey the area and establish a safe zone. Dr Price: you and Mr Zeller will accompany us as well. When we have a strategy in place then Mr Graham can come tomorrow night.” He pauses and glances severely at Will. “On the *strict* understanding that he stays in full view of his colleagues at all times and refrains from running off down any alleyways or picking random fights with tall dark strangers. And it goes without saying that this is in complete confidence. It’s imperative that neither the press nor general public discover this operation, so not a *word* to your families or friends. And you’re all going to have to disguise yourselves.”

“How should we do that sir?”

“Use your imagination Sergeant Matthews. This is one of the most deprived parts of London; you all need to look as cast down as possible.”

“Mr Graham won’t have to disguise himself,” mutters Dr Chilton in an undertone.

“I think I‘ll go as a publican,” says Inspector Brent, trying to lighten the progressively ominous atmosphere. “I have a cap and apron at home that would be just the thing.”

“In that case I may go as a fishmonger,” muses Price. “I rather like the idea of peddling fish. What?” he adds defensively when everyone turns to stare at him. “Surely there are far more offensive things to peddle than the humble fish? It’s not like I’m proposing to peddle…” he pauses, obviously trying to think of something outlandish; everyone waits patiently. “*Turds*,” says Price triumphantly.

“Who the bloody hell peddles those?” demands Jack who looks like he’s on the verge of another explosion.

“Ordure collectors,” replies Price rather smugly. “They sell it to the tanning industry. Have you never seen those poor souls wandering around after the horses with shovels and buckets? Speaking of which Dr Chilton…are you sure you don't wish to come with us?”

“I think I’ll go as a knife grinder,” says Zeller in a gloomy voice. “Or a slaughterhouse worker. At least it’ll mean I can pack more sharp objects than the Ripper.”

"In that case I might go as a serviceman,” adds Sergeant Matthews. “I could borrow my grandfather’s musket.”

“You are *all* being issued with firearms.” Jack folds his arms and looks stern. “And if any officer here is harbouring fantasies of running round Whitechapel being a hero, I suggest you take a long hard look at the autopsy photographs and remind yourselves *exactly* what this individual is capable of.”

There's a solemn silence which is finally broken by an anxious sigh from Sergeant Matthews. “Oh my,” he says in a timid voice, “it’s like the world’s most terrifying fancy dress party isn’t it.”

“It is young man,” says Price kindly, “but we shall all be keeping an eye out for each other. What are you going as Mr Graham?”

As everyone turns round to stare at him, Will tips his chair back and folds his arms resolutely in front of him. “As myself of course,” he replies grimly. “Isn’t that what he’s looking for?”

*****

Soon afterwards the meeting breaks up and the police contingent is sent back to the main office while the medical team remain sequestered within Jack’s inner sanctum to cross-reference between the contents of the box and the stack of autopsy reports. Will watches them surreptitiously through the glass pane of the door, noting (with slight envy) how Hannibal radiates an indefinable air of panache and glamour and the way that the others fall silent as soon as he opens his mouth. It’s further apparent that while Price, Chilton and Jack tend towards wild gesticulation and raised voices Hannibal remains calmly composed the entire

time with an expression that alternates between polite interest and, on occasion, something like amusement; also that he never once takes his eyes off the person he's speaking to.

Chilton exits the office first and stands glowering in the corner, then Price emerges next and pulls up a chair next to Will in order to commiserate about *The Tattle Crime* article. "As twisted as barley sugar," announces Price, obviously pleased with this colourful analogy. "Anyone with a grain of sense could see that it had been appallingly slanted." So Will smiles gratefully and thanks him for his support, while also being guiltily aware that Price is giving him far more credit than he's probably entitled to.

"You should be prepared for some hostility from our more simple-minded colleagues," adds Price. "Naturally some people are credulous enough to take everything they read in the papers as gospel truth – or malicious enough to be motivated to believe it is. But otherwise everyone loathes *The Tattle Crime* for the way it's covered the Ripper investigation, and of all the newspapers to be attacked by it's undoubtedly the one that people of good sense are the least disposed to take seriously."

"Thank you," says Will sincerely.

"And how are you now? You look much better than when I last saw you."

"I am. Thank you."

"Typhus, was it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well regardless you should come and speak to me if it ever happens again. Admittedly I spend more time these days in the company of the deceased, but I did gain my medical license assisting the living and am happy to give you any advice if you require it – free of charge, of course. And if you suspect you are succumbing to the same illness alluded to in *The Tattle Crime* then you should *definitely* come and see me. Neurological inflammations are complex and severe, they need addressing as soon as possible. Although I suppose you know that better than I do."

Will agrees, rather bleakly, that this is indeed the case and Price gives him a kindly smile. "Don't be too despondent Mr Graham," he adds. "Note also that even your recent correspondent is inclined to believe you've been misrepresented. Which means that if the letter is genuine, then Dr Chilton is even stupider than Jack the Ripper."

He claps Will on the shoulder then bustles off in search of Zeller, and Will can't help reflecting on the almost seismic shift in his condition compared to the last time he was here, so oppressed and overpowered and with nowhere to turn. Without even thinking about it he raises his eyes again to the office door and immediately sees that Hannibal is already staring at him through the pane of glass. Jack is facing the other way and waving his hands around animatedly: no doubt discussing Will. As if to confirm this, Hannibal gives him a very faint smile before neatly swivelling his gaze back to Jack.

“Well well Mr Graham, here you are again” says Dr Chilton’s voice abruptly into his ear. “Quite like the proverbial cat, aren’t you? Vigorously using up your nine lives.”

“No more than you,” replies Will, reluctantly forcing himself to stop looking at Hannibal and turn towards Dr Chilton. The latter’s face is still bruised and swollen from its recent acquaintance with Will’s forehead, and judging from the malevolent gleam in his eyes he’s clearly not inclined to either forgive or forget. Will raises his eyebrows. “How’s your nose?” he says with feigned concern.

“Troublesome yet improving by the day. Of which the same cannot be said of your odd little brain; in fact surely the opposite could be considered the case. Had a lucky escape there didn’t you?”

“If you mean from your illegal attempt at committal,” says Will, “then I suppose I did.”

“And now we have the illustrious Dr Lecter turning up out the blue to give us his valuable input. Quite the coincidence, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it?” says Will. “One would almost think this was the most notorious murder case of modern times and that Mr Crawford is seeking all the expert help he can get.”

Dr Chilton gives a thin smile and then slowly lets his gaze crawl over Will’s face. “A cat with nine lives,” he repeats softly. “Tell me, Mr Graham; are you also familiar with the expression *‘There’s more than one way to skin a cat’*?”

“Still here Dr Chilton?” announces Hannibal, who seems to have appeared out of nowhere with the usual silent tread. “How very obliging of you; I would have expected you to have returned to your asylum by now.”

“Oh…Dr Lecter,” says Dr Chilton, who’s clearly been startled and is trying not to show it. “I didn’t see you there. Just telling Mr Graham how pleased I am to, um, see that he’s on the mend.”

“*Are* you on the mend Mr Graham?” asks Hannibal opening his dark eyes very wide.

“Possibly not,” says Will thoughtfully, “although maybe broken in a far more interesting way. You should be careful when handling broken things Dr Chilton; they have all kinds of sharp edges.”

“Well, you know where I am if you need any assistance,” answers Dr Chilton, feigning politeness for what he believes to be Hannibal’s benefit. “Any mental…support.”

“Yes, I know exactly where to find you,” replies Will without smiling.

“Then I wish you a good afternoon,” says Dr Chilton unctuously. He turns and nods at Hannibal. “Dr Lecter; I’m sure I shall see you again before long.”

“Indeed you shall,” replies Hannibal serenely. “In fact you may depend upon it.”

Dr Chilton nods again and then saunters off, completely unaware of two sets of eyes beaming into the back of his head. “Well Mr Graham,” says Hannibal without turning round, “rather an eventful day.”

“Very much so Dr Lecter,” replies Will. “As you say, the stakes appear to have been raised.”

“I must say I admire your courage,” pipes up Zeller from a nearby desk. “I’d be hysterical by now if he’d written to me.”

“As would most people,” says Hannibal with a subtle glance at Will.

“Are you two still here?” calls out Jack, whose head has abruptly appeared from round his office door. “You can leave now if you like, there’s nothing more to be done for the time being. Mr Graham, report back here tomorrow afternoon: we’ll update you on the details of tonight’s surveillance.

“Sir.”

“Well off you go then,” says Jack with rather forced heartiness. “You look a bit pale; makes sense to get some rest while you can.”

Will nods absent-mindedly then dons his coat and scarf and strides out of Scotland Yard without looking either left or right, instead gazing ahead with a stony expression on his face as the other officers mutter amongst themselves about the letter and cast uncertain glances in his direction. After checking that no one’s watching him he heads towards Trafalgar Square and waits behind one of the stone lions, shifting impatiently from one foot to another until Hannibal joins him there a few minutes later.

“Quick,” says Will, “move to the side. No – round here. Someone might see you.”

“How very cloak and dagger this all is,” observes Hannibal, amused. “What are you most concerned by: the nature of my presence at Scotland Yard being discovered, or the fact you are lodging at my house?”

“Both,” replies Will bluntly.

Hannibal smiles at this, clearly unconcerned, then leans back against the stone plinth and puts his hands in his coat pockets. It’s a stance in which anyone else would look ungainly, but Will can’t help thinking that there’s something about Hannibal’s inherent elegant that enables him to remain poised throughout; sufficiently lissom and graceful to appear like just another part of the sculpture. “So what do you want to do now?” Hannibal adds. “It is only four o'clock. I suppose we could return to Harley Street, although that seems rather uninspired considering we have all of London at our disposal.”

“I don’t know,” says Will. In his current position Hannibal is shorter than he is, and he’s quite enjoying the sensation of being able to look down on him. “What are the options?”

“Well, to begin with the National Gallery is just across the Square.”

“I suppose we could do that,” says Will cautiously. “If you wanted.”

“Yes, why not?”

“No reason,” replies Will. So Hannibal uncurls from the plinth and draws himself up to his full height – Will sighs regretfully, although it was quite nice while it lasted – and begins to lead the way towards the museum: an imposing Parthenon-like building that soars over Trafalgar Square like a large Grecian temple. “Actually it’s a good idea,” Will adds with a bit more enthusiasm. “I can’t remember when I last went to an art gallery.”

“Then you should make up for lost time,” replies Hannibal crisply. “Ah, and see here – they are holding a retrospective of William Blake. I know the nature of the investigation means you are tired of contradictory things, but at least you can now behold some which are beautiful.”

“*Songs of Innocence and Experience*,” reads Will from the exhibition guide. “That’s rather striking. Do you know what it refers to?”

“It was the title of his collected poems: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.”

“Another opposition…like beauty and horror,” murmurs Will, suddenly reminded of the evening on Hampstead Heath.

“Indeed,” replies Hannibal. “Or self-knowledge and self-denial.” He gives Will a thoughtful look then briefly places a hand on his shoulder to steer him towards the gallery; and Will, after some initial anxiety that someone might notice, decides that he rather likes the intimacy and leans contentedly into the touch. And it not like anyone is *really* likely to remark on it, given the way that the throngs of art admirers are all obliged to press up together within the confined space. In fact the entire gallery is unexpectedly busy for a weekday afternoon: mostly middle-aged men in top hats and frock coats interspersed with the occasional young one whose accessories of notepads, highly patterned cravats and air of scowling concentration identify them as students. In the corner an ancient curator is dozing in a wicker chair with his cap pulled over his eyes, lolling beneath an elaborate banner urging museum patrons to marvel at the largest ever collection of the works of William Blake.

“Extraordinary aren’t they,” says Hannibal as Will admires the row of watercolours; each one exquisitely worked and eerie and ranging from the infernal and apocalyptic to the fragile and virtuous, yet all so vivid and knowing, and so snapping with energy and effervescence that the figures look ready to step out of their canvasses and move around the room. Will feels rather awed to be in the presence of what’s clearly supreme originality – an artist of genuine vision – and even finds himself briefly forgetting the exigencies of the investigation in favour of savouring one luminous image after another: angels and demons ranked next to beggars and noblemen, God and the Devil, leering gargoyles and flaming effigies; and despite their lurid hues and tints, all managing to be somewhat reassuring to Will in the sense that this must surely have been a person whose internal life was even more inflamed than Will’s own, and yet who obviously found a way to shape the visions into something of genius and beauty. In this respect the final painting in the row is possibly the most striking of all: a monstrous, humanoid dragon, scarlet and slavering, that hovers over the prostrate form of a woman while jagged storm clouds roil around and shadowy darkness threatens to engulf them both.

“The dragon and the woman’s arms are in mirror image,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “Outstretched and imploring. Yet another opposition to add to our existing ones: the implication that good and evil are a duality – like the dark and light sides of the moon – rather than independent forces.”

Will nods abstractedly, suddenly less attentive to the mediations on good and evil than he is of the expression on the woman’s face. In fact now he’s noticed it, it’s hard not to be aware of *all* the assorted depictions of women in the room: so often either victimised, sanctified, or iniquitously sinful. There don’t appear to be any other choices available, and he briefly remembers his conversation with Margot and wonders what she would say if she could see the pictures too. He abruptly turns his back on the dragon and moves onto the next row to study a different painting – a haunting, almost occultish image of a creeping animalistic figure crouched on hands and knees – when to his left he becomes aware of Hannibal being accosted by one of the middle-aged, top-hatted men (or possibly it’s one of the students; Will’s reluctant to turn round and risk getting drawn into the conversation, so it’s hard to tell) who’s recognised Hannibal from a lecture at The Royal Academy and wants to offer their noisy congratulations. Will is shy of being introduced so ducks away to try and distance himself from the exchange; although even as he’s doing so, he can’t help being aware of how pleasant it feels (albeit briefly, and possibly even erroneously) to be one half of a striking and accomplished pairing. In spite of himself he lifts his head again so he can briefly catch Hannibal’s eye and smile; and it’s at that moment that his attention is suddenly snagged by a couple who have taken his place in front of the dragon watercolour.

The man’s features are obscured by how far down his face he’s pulled his cap, and Will can’t help feeling that if this was done deliberately to appear inconspicuous then the eeriness of the spectacle is achieving quite the opposite effect. He’s leaning in very close to his companion: a young, pretty woman in a straw bonnet who’s clinging to his elbow with a slim gloved hand. Her eyes have a slightly unfocussed look and it’s this, as well as the white cane partially obscured by the fringes of her shawl, that indicate she must be blind. Will’s initial thought is that it’s an odd choice of entertainment to escort someone who can’t see, until he realises that the reason the man is leaning so close is to describe the picture to her, which he’s currently doing in extensive and meticulous detail:

“The stakes are no less than the fate of humankind. Darkness and shadow fill the sky above like a storm cloud as the dragon’s wings stir a great wind and sweep her hair upward, flame-like…”

His voice is intense and rapturous, the woman’s face likewise spellbound with the vividness of the narrative, and the sight of such quietly mutual absorption makes Will vaguely ashamed of his previous scepticism. He continues to watch the couple, feeling rather moved, until the man’s head swivels sharply to the left and it’s obvious he’s realised he’s being observed. It’s his head which moves first, the body rotating mechanically a few seconds later like an afterthought as the shadowy half-face appears to twitch beneath the cap; and the whole effect would be rather unsettling if Will wasn’t preoccupied with a surge of embarrassment at having been caught staring at a blind woman with what’s probably been misinterpreted as prurient and insensitive interest. He’s briefly tempted to apologise and attempt to explain but is concerned that despite his best efforts it’ll sound enormously patronising, so in the end opts to flee the scene of the crime and is about to re-join Hannibal when a hand suddenly grasps

his arm. The fingers are like pincers, clasping down in a covetous proprietary way, and Will violently jerks himself free and spins round only to find, to his considerable discomposure, that no one appears to be there. Then he's about to spin back the other way when an unpleasantly familiar voice croons "*Hello Mr Graham*," straight into his ear.

Despite his best efforts Will is beset with a powerful, crawling sense of unease; but he forces himself to ignore it, straightening his shoulders instead and then turning round in a deliberately casual way. "Mr Brown," he says curtly. "Back again so soon? You obviously didn't take my warning to heart."

"What warning was that Mr Graham?"

Will narrows his eyes slightly. "So what else do you do all day beyond waiting for me in Charing Cross?"

Matthew Brown doesn't take the trouble of responding to this, merely continues regarding Will with a crooked little smile on his face before saying, almost conversationally: "Who was that man you came here with?"

Will narrows his eyes even further. He's briefly tempted to deny it, but supposes there's no real point on the grounds that Matthew has obviously been watching for long enough to know that he and Hannibal arrived together and that claiming otherwise is going to seem overly defensive. "A colleague," he replies carefully.

"Do you often go to art galleries with your colleagues?"

"I do all *kinds* of things with my colleagues," snaps Will before realising, too late, that this actually sounds incredibly suggestive (if not, in fact, downright filthy). Matthew Brown obviously thinks the same because his thin face begins to twitch with what could possibly be amusement. Or possibly not – his feature are so unnaturally fluid it's actually quite hard to tell.

"They're very understanding aren't they?" he eventually says. "Your colleagues. They must have all read about you, just like I did. But they don't seem to care."

Will stares back meditatively. His features are calm and composed, yet offset by a mind that's internally racing and deeply reluctant overall to say anything that could disturb the delicate derangement of the balance as opposed to encouraging Matthew Brown to run on unimpeded for as long as possible and reveal a bit more about himself with every word uttered. As if sensing this, the latter gives another crooked little smile as he takes a slow, deliberate step forward; and Will forces himself to ignore the ingrained urge to pull away, instead remaining still and holding his ground.

"Why is that Mr Graham?" He steps another step closer. "Is it because they think you're special?"

"I doubt it," replies Will, slowly running his eyes over the pale, pinched face. An idea has just occurred to him and he's wondering how far he can reasonably take it. "More likely they know not to believe anything printed in *The Tattle Crime*. Especially when it's written by

Freddy Lounds." As he's speaking he's doing a series of rapid mental calculations – who are you, really? *What* are you? – and while he knows that to arrest someone without any solid physical evidence contravenes the whole philosophy of justice, it's unfeasible to not keep pushing this exchange for any possible bit of information it might yield. "*Like me you have been misrepresented in the newspapers so I know you will understand."* Then he thinks back to his conversation with Freddy outside the coroner's court; how sure he was. He's *still* sure.

"Oh?" says Matthew Brown. The syllable comes out faint and airy, like something that could be easily blown away.

Will stares back, counting down the seconds before he opens his mouth to reply. Then he tells himself that what he's about to do is merely a necessary investigative step to gauge a suspect's reaction to critical information. *That's all*, he thinks. *Anyone else might do the same*. Then he realises he's repeating the same line of defence he used at this morning's meeting: "*Both the judiciary and the doctors agreed that anyone with a similar condition could just as easily have done the same thing*." And the fact that then, as now, it's technically true; but that now, just like then, not just anyone *would* have done it. So Will stares back at Matthew Brown, knowing that what he's about to say could potentially have dire implications for Freddy; then he takes a deep breath – and says it anyway.

"Mr Lounds even misrepresented Jack the Ripper." Will enunciates each word slowly and carefully so there can be no possible mistake. "I have good reason to believe he was the original author of the 'Dear Boss' letter. Without him the media would never have seized on it the way they did."

Matthew Brown's pale, deadened eyes begin to flicker. "Why are you telling me that Mr Graham?"

*Because…because…*thinks Will wildly; and then behind him there's a sudden clattering sound followed by a swell of voices as the blind girl drops her cane, stumbling as she attempts to retrieve it. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she says, her voice thin with distress. "I'm so sorry. My friend, he's just here, he'll help me…I'm so sorry."

"Where's your friend miss? Can I help you at all," says the elderly curator. "What do you need?"

Will is highly reluctant to take his eyes off Matthew Brown for even a second, but the woman's obvious anguish has touched him in spite of himself and he quickly scans the gallery in search of her eerie, shadowy-faced companion. Everything is a blur of confusion in which various passers-by, having sensed a disturbance and reluctant to miss any possible action, are beginning to convene in the same small space. Someone barges against Will's shoulder and he pivots round, only to give a hiss of frustration when he realises that Matthew Brown, once again, has melted away into the crowd. "For fuck's *sake*," mutters Will under his breath. How is it even possible? He takes a step backwards, vainly trying to catch sight of the thin creeping figure amidst the surrounding scrum, and then gasps when his arm is seized for a second time.

"*So*," says Hannibal, spinning the word out into a long sibilant croon that's almost a sigh.

Will flinches slightly and Hannibal's mouth quirks into the faintest hint of a smile. "What?" snaps Will, but there's no response. "I don't…how long have you been stood there for?"

Hannibal still doesn't answer immediately, merely stares at Will with a gaze so piercing that for a few brief seconds it feels tantamount to being flayed. "What a cunning boy you are," Hannibal finally says in the same soft voice. "It is really quite remarkable."

Will stares back mutely, suddenly numb and heedless to the commotion that's unfolding around them – forgetting about the heat and crowds and chaos, forgetting even about Matthew Brown; and when Hannibal wordlessly takes hold of his elbow and propels him out of the gallery he makes no immediate objection and allows himself to be taken away. Together they move down the empty echoing corridors, out of the main entrance, and then into a small shadowy yard that's concealed round the side of the building away from the crowds of Trafalgar Square. Hannibal finally lets go of Will's arm and then stands silently in front of him, his eyes gleaming very faintly in the winter twilight.

"What the hell is this?" snaps Will, suddenly unsettled. "What are you doing?"

"Extricating you," replies Hannibal softly. He takes a single step closer, his face looking slightly unworldly in the ghostly glow of the fog. Will automatically steps backwards but Hannibal, as if to raise the stakes, merely moves forward again himself – closer and closer – edging up into Will's space until Will is forced to retreat even further and only realising, when he feels rough bricks pressing against his shoulders, that there isn't anywhere else to go.

For a few seconds they stare at each other and then Will hisses: "I don't know what you mean."

"*Songs of Innocence and Experience*," says Hannibal, as if Will hasn't spoken. "The two contrary states of the human soul."

"I know," replies Will. His voice in his own ears sounds unfamiliar: incensed and resentful, almost a snarl.

"So which one are you?"

Will doesn't answer immediately, then hitches in a breath as he feels a warm, firm hand curl round the back of his neck. "Which one do you *want* to be?" Hannibal adds in the same low, rhythmic tone.

I don't want to play this game, thinks Will, a bit desperately; even as he knows that it's far too late and he's already started – has been playing it ever since that fateful day when he first walked down Harley Street to knock on one particular door…and with still no real idea of what the rules are except that he's probably going to playing it every day for the rest of his life. He tries to close his eyes and realises they're already closed, then gives a low moan as he feels Hannibal's tongue run lightly along his upper lip before pushing into his mouth at the same moment Will's shirt is jerked open at the collar and Hannibal's hand slides down to stroke his throat and collar bone.

For a few seconds Will goes entirely rigid before collapsing helplessly into the touch, finally gasping out "Oh *yes*," as their mouths briefly pull apart. Then it occurs to him that he doesn't really know what he's agreeing to; only that there's a sense of wanting to acquiesce regardless. *Yes yes yes*. He darts out his own hand and curves it round the back of Hannibal's head, pulling their faces closer together and tugging his hair. He does it roughly – roughly enough to hurt – although the motive isn't a wish to cause pain as opposed to demonstrate desire. Or permission? Possibly…possibly that. "*Yes*," repeats Will, louder than before.

"Indeed yes," murmurs Hannibal as he draws away. "Always yes; even when sense and reason say no. So defiant aren't you?"

Will mouth quirks into an enigmatic smile of its own. "Yes," he says.

Hannibal's eyes are still gleaming in the half-light. "So very cunning…so willing to cross the line. Several things have occurred tonight that promise repercussions. Haven't they Will? More than one person is going to have reasons to remember it."

"I know."

"Not least you and I."

"Me and you – yes."

"Of course no one *truly* knows what is going to happen in the future," says Hannibal softly. "Neither of us is clairvoyant." He trails a forefinger along the side of Will's jaw, slow and lingering, as if trying to memorise each contour of his face. "And time can be savoured and even slowed, but never stopped entirely. Yet one thing I do know; if I saw you everyday forever, Will, I would remember this time."

Will closes his eyes again. "That would be a long wait."

"It would."

"And in the meanwhile?" says Will. "What happens then?"

Hannibal prowls forward once more and this time, rather than backing away, Will arches almost rapturously towards him. "In the meanwhile?" repeats Hannibal. He reaches up his other hand and takes hold of Will's face, smoothing his thumbs beneath Will's eyes as if trying to rub away the shadows underneath them. "I am going to take you back to Harley Street with me. Right. Now."

"And then what?" asks Will, slightly breathlessly.

"And then…" says Hannibal softly. He leans forward and presses his lips against Will's forehead. "Then we are going to see on which side of the contradiction you really do lie."

*****

A short distance away in Fleet Street *The Tattle Crime* staff are beginning to pack up for the day. Despite the Editor's cosmopolitan aspirations for running the paper 24 hours in the

manner of *The London Times*, the majority of employees – underpaid and under-motivated – are deeply unwilling to sit up all night in the dim, cramped headquarters simply for the purpose of cranking out fraudulent sensationalist accounts of corruption and criminality. So as the office clock sounds out the hour they begin to drift towards the street one-by-one as the siren call of local taverns and music halls becomes too clamorous to resist.

"Come on lads," the typesetter yells out, "Marie Lloyd's on at the Alhambra tonight – if we go now there'll be tickets left."

"Forget Marie Lloyd," comes the raucous reply. "There's dancers on at Drury Lane; them French ones with the tiny skirts."

"No! You're having me on mate; I thought they'd been banned?"

"Not tonight they're not. It'll sell out quick though, so shift your arse."

"I'd rather watch those girls shift their arses," comes the reply, as chatting and laughing they grab their mufflers and overcoats and head towards the door. No one ever invites Freddy Lounds to leave his desk for a mug of beer or to sing along to a vaudeville number; and although he always notices the omission, he's long since managed to convince himself that he doesn't mind about it – and wouldn't care to go even he *were* asked – being far too senior and illustrious to mingle with the lower rungs of *Tattle Crime* staff. Naturally if the Editor were to ask it would be a different matter…not that the Editor ever does.

Freddy now yawns and stretches, contemplating a return home yet rather reluctant to face the empty fireside and solitary supper that's waiting there. So he takes a moment to savour his *Setting a Monster to Catch a Monster* headline instead, currently displayed in pride of place for convenient gloating. Will Graham is so typical of the realms of people who've attempted to spurn and dismiss Freddy over the years; talented, clever, alluring people who instinctively believe they're too good for him. That they're *better* in some way. Freddy frowns now, remembering his first approach to Will outside the coroner's court and the immediate and aloof rebuttal; the way Will scorned all attempts at camaraderie and clearly considered himself too superior to require any kind of ally in the press. In this respect what happened afterwards was entirely Will's own fault. He could even have been said to have *asked* for it.

The satisfaction to be gained from the newsprint is marred only by the fact that Will's face in the photograph still looks irritatingly composed and winsome; although of course the reality is going to be somewhat different by now. Through his network of spies and informants, Freddy is well aware that Will hasn't been seen anywhere near Scotland Yard for over a week and he amuses himself now with an image of Will, careworn and desperate, pleading with Freddy to retract the piece. The haughty, attractive face suddenly crumpled and exhausted; the arrogant voice tremulous and strained. The way he would beg: "*Please Mr Lounds, I'm so sorry I underestimated you. I'll do anything*." Freddy smiles to himself at the thought, mouthing along to the words in his head. Admittedly he'd have expected Will to petition for mercy much sooner, but there's still plenty of time yet so no need to be discouraged…and they always say that revenge is a dish best served cold.

Downstairs, the front door to the building gives a sudden creak as it swings open and Freddy looks up sharply. It's far too late for anyone to be attending the office for business reasons; no

doubt it's one of the younger reporters who departed earlier and has left something behind on his way to the music hall. Or possibly they've returned to invite Freddy to join them? No, that can't possibly be the case (not that he'd *want* to go). He strains his ears, waiting for this errant junior to announce themselves and apologise for disturbing him, but there's no sound at all except for the patter of rain against the window.

"Who's there?" he shouts.

Nothing. Nothing but wind and rain and the drone of the printing press next door which always shrieks and wails, even when switched off, because no one can ever be bothered to properly oil the pistons. Freddy scowls with irritation. He can't have imagined it…can he? He goes to his office door and peers down over the stairwell and into the gloom; but beyond a dirty curtain swooping and dipping in the breeze there's nothing moving. Nothing out of its place. Frowning again, Freddy returns to his desk and opens the top drawer from which he retrieves a bottle of whiskey and pours a small amount into an earthenware toothmug. The drawer is stiff and requires a few brisk rattles to force it open, and so it's only when it's closed and the noise has ceased that his ears detect a sound he would otherwise have noticed much earlier: the soft, relentless tread of footsteps coming up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

The letter in this chapter is based on the notorious "From Hell" letter (which is pretty disturbing so click with caution), originally sent to George Lusk of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee along with a section of human kidney. Obviously no one knows for sure; but of the several pieces of correspondence claiming to be from the killer, historians believe this is the one most likely to be authentic.

The painting referred to in this chapter is, of course, 'The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed With the Sun' (OMG, S3 feels…gah). I must confess that the dialogue describing it was not written by me, but reproduced from the very lovely website of The National Gallery of Art.

Finally! In reality the Scotland Yard CID were very committed and conscientious in trying to solve the Whitechapel murders; so just to emphasise that the investigative elements of this chapter are completely fictionalised and are not intended to reflect real-life individuals in any way.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Rambling author notes ahoy!

Happy Saturday my lovelies, thanks for your patience! Bleh, I'm afraid this monster fic is only my 2nd attempt at creative writing and it's been a VERY steep learning curve, hence continuing Writing Mojo problems. But me 'n' The Mojo are a pair of badasses at heart and are determined to persevere, so rest assured that this fic will definitely not be left unfinished – I swear before Our Lord and Saviour Bryan Fuller, the First Apostle Mikkelsen and Saint Hugh of Dancy.

I gather that the meaning of the art gallery scene in the last chapter was unclear for some, so apologies if you were left confused – I was probably assuming too much that everyone was familiar with the Red Dragon novel/film. For anyone who isn't, Lounds uses the media to misrepresent 'The Tooth Fairy' and gets targeted as revenge for it – thanks to being deliberately set up in advance by Will. In the show of course it's actually Dr Chilton who gets Grahamed instead, although both scenarios resulted in the immortal "What a cunning boy you are" line from Himself. In this respect I generally include lots of call-backs to canon, some of which may be more familiar than others, so please feel free to ask if something doesn't make sense.

Thanks are also owing to the wonderful Nalyra who kindly shares her encyclopaedic knowledge of the show to patiently answer my endless silly questions and whose insights gave me the inspiration for the conversation at the beginning of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The evening is a decidedly raw and murky one – sluiced with rain, swirling in sulphurous grey mist and whipped by a sadistic wind that gnaws at the bones like a dog – yet such unseasonable grimness has done nothing to deter the crowds from heaving and spilling across Trafalgar Square. There are bundles of scrambling humanity in every direction that Will cares to look: tourists and sight-seekers clutching sixpenny maps and small souvenirs as they shuffle back to their hotels, civil servants with bowler hats and briefcases, clerks in gaiters and worsted waistcoats, women in bonnets and children in pinafores: all self-seeking and purposeful, all going about their business, all vital and corporeal and full of life; and yet all as rigid and insentient to Will as the painted figures in the National Gallery, because he can think of *nothing* now except leaving with Hannibal as soon as possible. In his head he briefly imagines it: of crossing the square and finding a cab; of returning to Harley Street and opening the door (with a hand on his shoulder and a voice in his ear) and there confronting… what?

Hannibal, as usual, is able to flag down a hackney carriage with a single wave of the hand and practically bundles Will into it before snapping out the address and climbing in himself. It's now so dim and foggy that the driver is obliged to slow the horses down to a sluggish canter and beyond the window the streets are a confusion of swaying lanterns and scurrying figures that dart and weave through the mist. The wind is chivvying ragged clouds across the moon in such a way that silvery flecks stream through the glass at intervals, flickering in tandem to the rocking of the carriage and bleaching everything with a pale and ghostly tint; and yet none of it seems to matter as Will sits on one ledge facing Hannibal on the opposite side: both staring feverishly at one another and suffused with an unspoken tension that's so fiercely pronounced it's virtually flammable.

"Not yet," says Hannibal softly. "Patience. Wait…wait."

The journey feels interminable to Will – drawn and prolonged as something bent to breaking point upon the rack – but after what seems like several hours, although can only be a matter of minutes, there's a rattle of harnesses as the driver calls the horses to a halt and the destination is finally reached. It's so cold outside that Will can see his breath rising in frozen plumes and he stamps his feet against the pavement in an attempt to coax some warmth into them, acutely aware the entire time of the twitching curtains across the street that suggest their arrival is being furtively observed. Will glares defiantly at the curtains with his hands in his pockets before hissing with impatience at the slow, stately deliberation with which Hannibal seems determined to alight from the cab, pay the fare, thank the driver and then finally saunter into the house as if there's all the time in the world. In fact, considering the frenzied anticipation of the cab ride, such leisureliness actually feels tantamount to sadism and when Hannibal places a casual hand on his shoulder he irritably shrugs it off. Hannibal gives a small, inscrutable smile – clearly generated more for his own benefit than for Will's – and unlocks the door before lingering in the hallway, delicately wiping the rain from his face with his forearm like a cat washing its ears. Will follows behind and carefully closes the door, his cold hands fumbling slightly with the lock. Then he turns round and is immediately unnerved to see that Hannibal has prowled up with typical silent stealth and is now stood directly in front of him: poised, relentless, close enough to touch, and staring intensely with dark, unblinking eyes. Hannibal doesn't make any attempt to speak and Will decides that he must be waiting for something so hesitantly opens his own mouth, only to find himself being spun round and pushed up against the wall. And it's then that Will realises – much too late – that the previous leisurely approach had far less to do with tantalization than it was designed to lull Will into a false sense of security and therefore destabilise him even more.

Their lips are nearly on a level now, sharing each other's air, and Will is so sure that Hannibal is about to kiss him that he closes his eyes in anticipation. But instead Hannibal pins both of Will's hands above his head with one of his own, then runs his fingers down Will's face and along his jaw with the other. "Art for art's sake, and artistry by proxy," says Hannibal in a voice that's vaguely frightening in its level of forceful concentration. *And yet it's still a strangely beautiful voice*, reflects Will hazily. Husky, slow and caressing…even now. Even when imbued with menace. Even when it's about to tell him things that he's not certain he's ready to hear.

In fact Hannibal has now fallen quiet again: serenely staring and wordless as his eyes catch the reflection of the gaslights through the door panel in a rather eerie way. It's as if he's lit up

from within – a candle set in his skull like the medieval relics – and Will gazes into the darkness of the light with his own eyes wide and lips slightly parted. *One breath in and one breath out*, thinks Will. *The trick is to keep breathing*. He's acutely aware of how he's begun to arch his back towards Hannibal, pushing his hips forward and bearing his throat, and even though it's not deliberate he feels powerless to stop himself doing it. The word *magnetism* seems to apply. An irresistible force that attracts or repels as a gift of nature, which has no choice and no control, because it just *is*…

"There are so many different modes and methods for art," Hannibal suddenly says; and the abrupt sound of his voice in the midst of so much weighted silence is startling enough to make Will jump, like someone shaken out of a deep sleep. "Did you know that? You certainly ought to: we have discussed several of them already. Painting. Poetry. Sculpture. Food. The corporeal body. So many ways to assume the perspective of an artist; or even, one might say, to *consume* it." Hannibal pauses and smiles very faintly. "Consume...Yes, I suppose one might say that. But as it is I suspect that you, Will Graham, are destined to be my greatest masterpiece."

The cryptic qualities of this speech immediately make Will frown and shake his head with impatience; self-consciously aware, despite the assertiveness of the gesture, of the way his chest is rising and falling beneath the thin material of his shirt in a weird, heady combination of desire, anticipation and something a little like fear. "Don't look so sad," says Hannibal, suddenly gentle again as he rubs his thumb against Will's cheek. "You always seem so sad. Such unspoken desolation in those large eyes, all the time. You have every reason to be content – so many people are much happier than you are without having any of your advantages. Look at everything you possess. Imagination. Perception. Youth. Beauty. Resourcefulness. Courage. And intelligence; of course intelligence. So shrewd and ingenious aren't you Will? So endlessly clever."

"I'm not, I…what the hell are you talking about?"

Hannibal makes a sighing sound so low it's almost a hiss, then moves in even closer until his chest is pressed up against Will's; arching slightly to the left as if he's trying to align the humming pulse of their heartbeats. "You think I am merely talking about *conventional* intellect don't you?" he says softly. "The type they dole out in schools and reward with little scraps of embellished paper at the end of each year. The conformist type, which has all manner of pointless information at its disposal. Which knows the fourth digit of pi – for example." He smiles again and then pauses, as if awaiting an answer.

"Five," snaps Will.

"Or the capital of Prussia?"

"Berlin."

"Or the number of elements in the periodic table?" purrs Hannibal.

"Fifty six. For God's sake, this is…"

“See?” says Hannibal in a sardonic voice. “A perfect prodigy, aren’t you? Guaranteed to be the brightest person in the room.”

“You know, I can almost hear you amending that statement,” replies Will. He smiles in spite of himself and then tugs his wrists to the side; trying, and failing, to work them free of Hannibal’s grip. “You’re thinking: ‘unless it’s a room *I* happen to be in’.”

Hannibal smiles himself at that and then leans in even further and presses his mouth against Will’s ear; sufficiently close and confining that it feels as if the words are being poured straight into his skull. “So much for *that* type of intelligence,” he says caressingly. “But what if I am talking about a different kind entirely?” His lowers his voice even more until it’s little above a whisper and slowly begins to stroke Will’s hair with his free hand. “Congratulations for the job you tried to do on Freddy Lounds,” murmurs Hannibal. “I admired it *enormously*. The game is afoot, isn’t it Will? The die is cast. How do you plan to commemorate him?”

At the sound of the words Will jolts sharply and then begins to struggle in earnest. Hannibal’s grip tightens as his smile grows fractionally broader. “I don’t know what you mean,” hisses Will.

“Of course you do,” replies Hannibal, so calmly precise that the simple statement succeeds in shocking Will into submission far more effectively than a vigorously argued rebuttal would have done. “Although naturally this is only the beginning. You told me the very first time we met that you had survived a brain fever: and how quick you were to assure me that it was something consigned to the past. But it is not, is it Will? I saw that myself in our subsequent meeting, just as soon I began to question you about yourself – the way your mind is still on fire. Admittedly it’s from a very different cause, yet still burning so brightly despite it. Something singular appeared from the flames in America, didn’t it? I am still waiting to see what transpires on this occasion: what’s going to emerge from the chrysalis. Although this time, of course, you don’t have the comfort of oblivion. In America you were unaware of what you were doing. Now you are obliged to question your motives.”

“No,” snaps Will, who’s now gone very pale. “No, you're wrong.”

“I remember you telling me you were fond of fishing,” continues Hannibal, calmly undeterred by this obvious opposition. “Fishing is a form of hunting, is it not? Necessitating planning, persistence and patience. *Infinite* patience. One sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the line. Tell me Will, how disappointed are you going to be if it turns out that you cast your line into the wrong waters tonight and disclosing your suspicions about Mr Lounds has no effect upon his welfare?”

Will allows his body to slacken to let Hannibal think he’s given up trying to struggle and then, as soon as he feels the grip begin to loosen, uses the resulting lack of pressure to jerk himself free. Hannibal smiles slightly but shows no signs of irritation, instead merely darting out his hands and taking hold of Will’s own, entwining their fingers together while continuing to hem him in against the wall. “You’re wrong,” repeats Will in a flat, emotionless voice. “It wasn’t like that.”

“And how *disappointed* will you be,” continues Hannibal, as if Will hasn’t spoken, “if it transpired that you cast correctly and Mr Lounds feels the effects of it? He would be removed

from the equation, very true; and yet removing him by someone else's hand is not the reckoning you promised yourself."

Will shakes his head again and then gives a sharp gasp as he feels Hannibal's long fingers beginning to run through his hair. "Such a beautiful, intricate mind," says Hannibal softly. "How brightly and fiercely it burns. You've begun to play the game now Will; you can't keep denying it to yourself. My only question is – how far you are prepared to go? What are you willing to do to persuade your prey to take the bait?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"But naturally I do. I know better than anyone. Look at how you have lured me in; so coolly and serenely, not even fully aware you were doing it. And look how I drew you in, in turn. Why did you keep coming back to me Will? There were so many other places you could have gone. Jack Crawford. Dr Price. That very sympathetic landlady of yours. And yet every time you returned to me."

As soon as Hannibal says this then Will temporarily feels the fight seeping out of him. "I know," he replies after a pause. "I *know*…I came back. I wanted to."

"Indeed you did. It frightens you doesn't it? The way your longing for intimacy changes your awareness and self-perception; how it threatens your self-control. Remember Will – beauty and horror. You want to remain in control of yourself, to be the arbiter and master of every thought and sensation; and yet how you also yearn to give yourself up to the rapture of losing control. The *ecstasy* of it – indulging all your dark desires. Our Jack the Ripper is doing the same thing, yet in such an artless, graceless, *pointless* way. You, on the other hand…you are quite a different matter entirely. Your hungers and cravings merge in ways that are corrupted, and yet remain so beautifully and artfully displayed."

"Bullshit," snaps Will, suddenly flaring back to life and repulsed, even as he's entranced, by this calm deconstruction. "For God's sake. You think you understand it all don't you? That you know me so well?"

"I do know you," replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. "Although that is not to say I don't wish to know you better despite the fact it hurts us both. And how it *hurts*. Doesn't it Will? Closeness to another person can do that; it requires a level of discomfort, even of pain. You've see that already haven't you? All the different heights and depths of intimacy – the intellectual, the emotional, the physical. The insights it may bring, the way the Other reflects back oneself. And how uncontainable and overwhelming it can feel: surrendering control and suffering the loss of self-deception." He leans forward again – slow, measured and endlessly menacing – and begins to trace his lips against the side of Will's face, interspersing the hint of feather-light kisses with the continuingly crooning words. "We can do that tonight, Will. Isn't it what you came back here for? We can relinquish our control together – like a leap of faith from the same precipice. The same plunge into the same abyss at exactly the same time. But what you also have to know is that it's only one kind of consummation, because a relationship can be sealed in all manner of ways. I know you don't yet understand what I mean; society places such a premium on the physical, you can't imagine what else we might do beyond this. What other ceremonials or acts and rituals might exist. What we might

accomplish side-by-side to formalise things. But you shall." His teeth graze lightly against Will's throat, hovering and threatening to bite. *"Because you want it*."

Will feels his breath hitch and in that moment it takes every possible shred of control and self-command not to simply collapse at Hannibal's feet and beg him to take Will apart there and then, because – *Yes. Yes, I want to fall; I want to take the plunge and I want you to take it with me*. But instead he channels his previous resentment at what – fundamentally – is an outrageous and presumptuous invasion of boundaries, before straightening his shoulders and replying in a voice that's practically a snarl: "So will you."

"Of course me too; naturally so. Don't you remember what I said? That I intend to discover everything you have to show me."

"And do you remember what *I* said?" snaps Will in response. "I said you'd have to work for it." He gives his wrists a sudden vicious tug then twists to the side to wrench himself free. "Stop acting as if you're doing me a favour. You think you're lowering yourself to give up your control, don't you Dr Lecter? Well you're not giving up anything – I'm *taking* it."

He puts both hands on Hannibal's chest and roughly pushes him away, and for a few heated seconds they simply gaze at each other: Will impassioned yet resentful; Hannibal quietly captivated and enthralled. "The war deity and warrior," Hannibal finally says with a slow, sardonic smile. "Just as I told you last night. But what is it that you're really fighting for?" He takes a deliberate step forward as if daring Will to try and stop him; and Will stares numbly back in a feverish combination of what's partly panic, partly anger and most of all a surge of helpless, hopeless desire that's almost shocking in its intensity. "When I asked you before you told me you didn't know. I think it is more the case that you do not wish to find out."

For a few moments neither of them move or speak, merely stand and stare with breathing aligned and gaze maintained, as beyond the window the heavy sonorous chime of the church bell begins to sound out, eerily gothic and foreboding in the inky black silence. *Think not for whom the bell tolls*, recites Will wildly to himself. Then Hannibal suddenly darts forward with one of his unnervingly fast movements and Will, more out of wary impulse than conscious decision, neatly spins out the way to avoid it then presses his temporary advantage by sprinting off upstairs and vanishing into the darkness. Even as he's running he's surreally aware of not fully knowing why or, for that matter, where to. Although perhaps they're simply the wrong questions and it's more a case of what he's running *from*: which is the knowledge that remaining still and allowing himself to be overpowered (tame and subdued, and up against the wall of a corridor) feels untenable. *Unbearable*…he won't let it happen. So he tears up the stairs two at a time, fleet-footed and unwavering, all the while acutely aware that the house is as silent as a crypt with absolutely no sounds to indicate pursuit. And it's only when he's cleared the stairs and reached the first floor with nothing to disturb the silence that he realises, with a plunge of unease, that Hannibal is so confident he can catch him with minimal trouble that he's actually giving him a generous head start. There's something about that which Will finds sinister – predatory, even – and in his state of feverish anxiety it's actually enough to make him wish he'd never started the pursuit in the first place, because the idea of being silently hunted through this crookedly winding pitch-black house is deeply unsettling. As such he abandons his original plan of heading to the top storey and

remains on the first floor instead, double-backing down the landing to conceal himself in a small alcove whose shadowy recesses would make it impossible to see him without a candle. Pride prevents him from simply surrendering and going back downstairs – holding up his hands and declaring that he doesn't want to play this game – but as it is he isn't entirely sure what else to do. After a few unhappy seconds he resolves to wait where he is until he hears Hannibal walk past on his way upstairs and then silently slip back down to the ground floor to wait in the consulting room which is a familiar and therefore reassuring location. Neutral territory, as it were. That way he can put an end to all this madness while saving face; and with any luck reassert a bit of normality (if such a thing is still possible) and begin the evening anew in a less disturbing way.

Will gives a chipper little nod to reassure himself that this is a satisfactory plan – although the satisfaction begins to decline when several minutes have dragged past with absolutely nothing to indicate that Hannibal has followed him upstairs and it becomes increasingly apparent that he could be in for a long wait. There are no sounds at all in fact – no signs of life – nothing beyond the wind whining in the chimney and the crackle of the fire from the bedroom. Where are all the servants? (Not that this is necessarily a bad thing; if Mary came in now and discovered him playing what's essentially a demented adult version of hide and seek then there's a real chance the embarrassment levels could prove fatal). Although just some sort of noise or movement would do: footsteps in the street – Dr Grant, perhaps, on his way to someone else's sickbed – or a door banging in a neighbouring house, even the scuffling of mice in the wall. Christ, there's still nothing…what the hell's going on? Will has a sudden urge to yell down the stairs and inform Hannibal that he's a crafty bastard (a crafty, *sneaky* bastard) who should learn to lumber about while making a noise like a normal person. But even as he's thinking it he knows he won't, because such a gesture would have a degree of levity about it: and Will can't summon the necessary energy for humour because in spite of himself – and without fully understanding why – he knows that he feels afraid.

For Christ's sake, thinks Will irritably. *Get a grip on yourself, you stupid shit*. Such timidity is ridiculous, he knows it is. This isn't a genuine chase, it's not like there's anything at stake. It's not like it's *real*. So why does he feel as if it is? Will draws a slightly shuddering breath, trying to persuade himself to calm down, and is rewarded for the surge of self-possession by a distinct creaking at the end of the corridor that he deduces to be the door of the second floor stairwell swinging open. Will genuinely can't fathom how the holy fuck Hannibal has managed to get that far without making any noise (crafty, sneaky, *shifty* bastard) but he's too relieved to really care because at least it means he can finally emerge from his horrible dark hiding place in which there's nothing for company except doubt and dread and the sound of his own heartbeat pounding wretched and nervous in his ears. He counts out a minute to ensure that Hannibal will be safely concealed upstairs, and then silently slips out of the alcove and begins to cautiously edge down the landing without making any obvious noise (and therefore proving that he may well be a bit of a sneaky bastard himself). In his head he imagines reaching the consulting room and stoking up the fire that the housemaids will almost certainly have left burning there. How he'll wait for Hannibal while looking deliberately casual and unconcerned; the way he'll sling his jacket over the back of the chair and loosen his collar. '*Well that got a bit weird didn't it?*' he'll say, and Hannibal will raise a fastidious eyebrow in response then pour them both a drink from the crystal decanter, pretending to be serious even though his mouth is twitching into a smile. '*Weird, Will? Is that one of your American expressions…?*'

Will arrives at the end of the landing and waits a few more seconds to get his bearings amongst the stifling gloomy shadows before shifting towards the staircase with the same noiseless tread. The darkness is now so thick and suffocating it feels like being swathed in fabric – as if it could be cut with a pair of tailor's shears; so many pounds for a yard – and for a second he thinks he sees a figure moving towards him and jumps violently before realising it's only the curtains rifling in the draught. Oh fuck, this is ridiculous: his breathing really has sped up now, chest heaving with what's undoubtedly…fear. *It's fine, you're nearly there*, he thinks reassuringly to himself. *It's nearly over*. Only he isn't, and it's not, and the silence is abruptly ripped apart by Will's helpless, frightened wail as a powerful arm shoots out the darkness with deadly precision and wraps around his neck. A second arm grasps him round the chest and then Will is being swung round with sufficient speed and force for his feet to briefly leave the floor before he's set down and pushed up against the wall once more; face first this time, and frantic. Hannibal keeps him pinioned in place with the same iron grip then buries his face in Will's hair as if breathing him in.

"For God's sake!" yells Will. He's fighting to free himself at the same time as struggling to keep his voice from catching, and in that moment it's not entirely clear which requires the greatest effort. "Let go. *Let go*. You're hurting me."

Hannibal eases his hold a fraction but refuses to release him entirely. "An admirable effort there Will," he says. "Truly. However, once again I'm afraid you underestimated how patiently I am prepared to wait for you."

"Well done," snaps Will, with a sarcasm he doesn't genuinely feel.

There's a pause before Hannibal replies, and when he does there's a smile in his voice. "Naturally," he says, straight into Will's ear. "I knew you would come to me in the end."

"That observation is starting to get a bit old. Just so you know."

"Is it? Tell me, then; do *you* know how I was able to catch you so easily?"

I suppose because I wanted you to, thinks Will, a bit desperately, although he refuses to say it aloud.

"Because I tempted you into a false sense of safety," adds Hannibal after a pause. "I made you believe the threat had passed when it was actually at its greatest pitch. Never let your guard down Will." He smiles to himself then rests his face against the top of Will's head, turning slightly towards the window as he does so. Through the open curtains the moon is just visible behind a black lacing of clouds, as striking, solitary, self-contained and glacially steadfast as Will: and, just like the shimmering silver moon, what a forceful aura shines around him.

Will, in turn, lets out another long breath; trying and failing to think of something to say before ultimately conceding the inevitable and allowing his head to tip back against Hannibal's shoulder…and promptly feeling a sense of peace in it. He's still panting slightly from the effort of trying to free himself, but although the gesture appears submissive or placatory it doesn't really feel that way. Rather there's something empowering in having enough resolve to abandon caution and simply permit instinct to take over. Something brave

and bold; something fundamental. Internal truth-telling, perhaps…he supposes he could call it that. Head *vs*. heart. Fleetingly he thinks of his father, stern-faced and sermonising: "*I've said it before son, you should always have the courage of your convictions*." And then there are still those words from last night, poured into his ear in a smoky voice: "*To constantly renounce and disavow one's true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict*." Will gasps and closes his eyes, allowing his head to tip further back as he does so; and Hannibal makes a slight sighing sound himself at the sight of it and begins to tighten his grip once more. "That's right, good boy," murmurs Hannibal in the same caressing voice. "It would appear that I have won this *particular* round. Although rest assured I shall still be following my own advice for the next one; I have no intention of lowering my guard around you. It would hardly be safe, would it? As Mr Freddy Lounds shall soon be able to attest." He pushes his sharp hipbones against Will's back, and Will moans softly in response. "Nevertheless, none of this alters the fact that victory at the present time belongs to me. The bedroom is not far away: are you going to concede defeat and walk there yourself, or am I going to have to carry you?"

Will, unable to resist the temptation to be obstinate, replies "Do your worst," with a smile that Hannibal can't see; and Hannibal likewise smiles into the darkness and then simply pushes him back down the corridor with one arm across his chest and the other coiled around his waist, propelling him forwards like a prisoner under escort. Will makes no attempt to stop him but doesn't do anything to help out either – taking a perverse amount of satisfaction in allowing his feet to drag against the floor and letting Hannibal bear his full weight – until they finally stumble into the bedroom and Hannibal kicks the door shut behind them without letting go of Will. For a few seconds they stand still, entwined and cast in place like a statue composed of limbs, longing and snapping opposition, before Hannibal brushes his face against Will's cheek from behind and murmurs "Do you want me to release you?" in the same sardonic voice as before.

"Would it make any difference if I did?" Will's breath has now sped up so much that he feels slightly dizzy with it. In fact this must be close to what euphoria feels like: a rapturously skittering anticipation that crackles and pulses. And yet still so spiced with a dark and undeniable undertone of dread…how is that? It doesn't even make sense. "Besides, I wouldn't ask your *permission*," he adds in a firmer voice. "I'd just leave."

"Oh yes; you are taking rather than accepting aren't you?" replies Hannibal, and there's a simmer of energy underlying the usual deadpan tone that Will can't quite interpret. "But tell me: do you *really* believe that you're in control of yourself?"

"Of course," says Will sharply, meaning it. "Or do you still think *you* are?" He abruptly twists himself free and then turns round, firmly planting his feet then tipping his head back slightly so he can fix Hannibal with a coolly appraising stare. "You know we're only here because I'm allowing it. You virtually said so yourself."

"Actually, I did not say that," replies Hannibal with a satirical little smile. "But now that you've made the observation I wouldn't necessarily contradict you. In fact I'm no longer sure if I'm even capable of doing such a thing. What do you think? You know how hard I find it to deny you anything."

“Addicted to the patronage, aren’t you?” retorts Will with irritation. “You’re not my benefactor.” He realises he’s goading harder and harder for some kind of reaction, seeing how far he can safely (or unsafely) push things. But Hannibal doesn’t rise to the bait as expected, merely continues to regard Will with the same intense stare. Will stares back undeterred and Hannibal finally smiles again and then abruptly moves forward, picking Will up before he has any time to object and then spinning him round and depositing him on the bed. Will gasps as his back hits the mattress and then gasps again, even louder, as Hannibal leans over him and runs a considering finger down his cheekbone.

“You can’t provoke me in that way I’m afraid,” he says softly, “although I find it immensely pleasurable to watch you try.” His smile broadens slightly and then he waits. Waits and waits – never once taking his eyes off Will’s face and allowing the tension to ratchet up to an almost unbearable pitch – before finally reaching down and beginning to slowly unfasten Will’s shirt, loosening each button from its hole almost thoughtfully and pausing to trail his fingers beneath the fabric at every new bit of exposed skin in a way that makes Will quiver. “Do not be too discouraged though, you can rest assured that your incitements find their mark in other ways. It’s only that the provocation comes from sources which you don’t yet understand.” He slides his hand beneath Will’s shoulders, levering him up in order to slip the shirt off entirely before making a start on Will’s belt. “In this respect,” Hannibal adds in the same meditative tone, “I find myself able to accept frustrations at your hands that I would tolerate from no one else. And such beautiful little hands.” He lifts them up one by one, tracing his own fingers along Will’s knuckles then across the palm and wrist. “So slender and well-shaped. See? Look how long and delicate your bones are. So fragile and willowy, yet capable of such great potency. These hands of yours. There is so much ferocity in them. Isn’t there Will? All the things one can accomplish with one’s bare hands…Now wait here, please; remain exactly as you are.”

Hannibal stands up, shrugging off his own clothes as he does so with the usual graceful insouciance, and Will lies rigid for a few seconds, panting slightly and staring at the ceiling, before deliberately defying the instructions and hauling himself upright. The room is dim, being lit only by the smouldering remains of the fire, but he can immediately see that Hannibal is stood by the large rococo-style dressing table in the corner: casually rifling through the top drawer to retrieve a bottle of smoked green glass – rounded at the base and slimly tapering towards the end – before pausing and beginning to tilt the mirror from one side to another. The angling appears very deliberate and Will feels a hot surge of what’s partly embarrassment but also a sense of squirming, helpless arousal at the realisation that he's positioning it to reflect what's happening on the bed.

“I know you are disobeying me,” says Hannibal calmly without turning round. “I can hear you moving – although even if I could not, I would still have known it anyway. So very rebellious aren’t you? I wonder if you'll always be that way.” He prowls back over and sets the bottle on the bedside table before abruptly swinging round and arching over Will, pushing him down once more then pinning him in place by the wrists with a languid, panther-like grace that’s both striking and unsettling in turns. “What’s your opinion Inspector Graham; are you ever going to grow pliable? Although from my perspective, perhaps a more interesting question would be: do I even *want* you to?” He darts his eyes over Will’s face for a few seconds before leaning forward until their lips are nearly – but not quite – brushing together; and Will lies gasping underneath him, breath harsh and ragged, straining his neck upwards to

try and reach Hannibal's mouth and practically snarling each time he deliberately shifts just out of Will's reach. "Perhaps not," adds Hannibal in a voice that's so low and rhythmic it's practically a purr. "So what do you say now Will – what's your answer? Are you really ready to lose control?"

Will stares back defiantly, fierce and young and unafraid, and Hannibal finally relents and leans down to kiss him properly, his tongue stabbing and probing his mouth as he grinds his hips down into Will's. And Will finally wrenches his hands free so he can wrap his arms round Hannibal's back, giving a low moan and arching himself upwards, entire body curving like a bowstring as he claws his fingers against Hannibal's shoulders: fiercely fevered and frantic. "So passionate," murmurs Hannibal, briefly drawing away and pressing his lips against his forehead. "That's good Will; we're going to need it. Passion is like fire, it's a force to meld and liquefy. It solders two things together. And then afterwards it cools and sets, and as the entities solidify together it grows more and more difficult to prise them apart. Day after day Will, one night after another. Until they gradually become inseparable: fused together as one."

Will gasps and rocks his hips upwards again, screwing his eyes shut and trying to hook his legs around Hannibal's. "Oh God, I know," he says, almost helplessly. "I know, I know."

"Do you?" replies Hannibal. "Well I confess that I did not. Not until I opened the door one fateful day and discovered a rather intriguing American boy: stood on my step with his hands in his pockets and frowning up at me while refusing to look me in the eye. Not until then – not until I found you." He takes hold of Will's hands once more and presses them against the pillow, one on each side of his head, then runs his face down Will's jaw and throat and across his chest, breathing in the scent of his skin and counting each separate rib, still slightly too prominent after his long illness. Will, desperate for something more, groans with frustration and Hannibal scrapes his teeth against his collar bone. "Hush my love," he says softly, "be patient; let me know you again. Would you let me do that? It's been so long since I've had you laid out for me like this, several weeks now since that first time. Do you remember it? How frightened you were?" He pauses for a few seconds to savour the memory: Will, so seductive in his delicate, sensuous state of fear; like Narcissus brought to life, or a young Antinous preparing to cross the Nile. "But look at you now; despite the trepidation you can't disguise how badly you want it." He kisses his way back up Will's throat then releases his hands in order to stroke his own across Will's chest and waist, admiring the considerable beauty of his body by the firelight: smooth and ivory as the keys on the piano downstairs. "So inexperienced and yet so incredibly eager."

"*Songs of Innocence and Experience*," says Will wryly.

"Yes, indeed. How is it possible that no one has done this to you before, looking the way you do? What about at school? You must have been the new boy that all the prefects longed to take by the hand and lead into some deserted classroom."

"A few of them did," replies Will, gasping as he feels Hannibal's fingers beginning to skim down his hips, the touch deliciously warm and firm. "They soon realised it wasn't a good idea to try."

“Oh yes of course; I suppose you were a warrior even then.” Hannibal smiles faintly at the thought of it: a teenaged Will, all long limbs and uncertain passions – the forlorn foal that wistfully grazes away from the rest of the herd – longing for connection while fiercely and defiantly eluding it. “And so you come into my arms tonight as an exquisite *tabula rasa*. I can break you in however I like.”

“Yes...oh God, yes, I want you to.”

“I know you do. And I shall. You’ve put me in a rather privileged position haven’t you? All this beautiful terrain…untouched by human hand until now. No one else has ever had you like this. No one except me.”

Will groans slightly and shakes his head as Hannibal continues to pin him down: his face, hovering over Will’s, looks vaguely infernal by the flickering light of the fire. “No one except me,” he repeats, soft and intense. “Say it.”

“No one except you. Oh, *oh,* please don't stop.”

“But how can I stop Will?” says Hannibal, promptly reverting to his former, more casual mood. “How can I stop when I have barely even begun?” He resettles himself on his elbows so less of his weight is pressing on Will, smiling down at him and stroking his face and hair before idly wrapping a stray curl round his finger. “Look at you,” he adds thoughtfully. “So deceptive. You profess to dislike contradictions and yet you are an utter paradox yourself. So slim and pretty that it’s almost going to be like making love to a particularly beautiful girl – and yet so *very* dark and lethal beneath the surface. Silk around a steel core; I feel like I need protective coverings before I dare to handle you.” He shifts his palm to stroke Will’s hair away from where it’s begun to tangle into his eyes and murmurs: “Are you nervous?” Then he allows himself a private smile, because what he’s really reflecting on is how Will has finally disregarded the legality of the situation and instead chosen to follow his instincts and show solidarity with the lawless. After all, what they’re about to do could send them both to prison with a two year sentence of Hard Labour; and there’s no doubt that Will is aware of this. Yet how gratifying to see that he no longer appears to care.

Will lets out a slightly shuddering breath then reaches out to touch Hannibal’s face because he has a sudden urge to see if his cheekbones feel as sharp and chiselled as they look. “I don’t know. Yes…a little, I suppose.” Hannibal smiles again. “I don’t know what to expect.”

“But how you are going to enjoy finding out.”

“Is it going to hurt?” adds Will after a pause.

“Do you want it to?”

“No – God, who wants that?”

“You would be surprised,” replies Hannibal leisurely. “But in that case no, I shall make sure it does not. I intend to take my time with you Will. Relax and coax this beautiful body and make it ready for me. You may be wary and uncertain *now,*” he adds, gently tugging Will’s hair so his head tips back and he can kiss his throat, “but before much more time has passed

you are going to be *begging* me for it. And when you do, you'll be so open and ready for me that I shall be able to slide deep inside you with no resistance at all. *Deep* inside you Will, I promise, so sweetly, smoothly and easily – and you are going to take it so well. Then most likely you are going to beg me again, only this time you would not be urging me to begin but pleading with me not to stop. Are you going to do that Will; are you going to beg me? I hope so. You would do it so beautifully it would be impossible to resist you."

"Oh God," says Will, rather faintly.

Hannibal's Sphinx-like smile briefly reappears and he kisses Will's forehead before abruptly climbing off him and arranging himself against the headboard with his long legs stretched out in front. "Come up here to me," he adds when he see Will staring at him, clearly bewildered by the loss of contact. "I want to feel you." And Will flushes very slightly but immediately complies, settling himself against Hannibal's chest with his head on his shoulder and their legs tangled together. There's something about the sensation of having so much of another person's skin pressed against his own that's slightly strange yet completely exhilarating and he can't help remembering that night in his room, just hours before the murder of Charlotte Tate: the sensation of the walls enclosing him and how he'd longed for it to be someone's arms and body. Someone who was strong and safe and dependable, someone who wanted him…someone who was *there*. And how, even allowing for the vividness of his imagination, the reality is infinitely better. He sighs contentedly and Hannibal rubs his face against Will's hair a few times, savouring the scent and softness of it, before reaching for the bottle on the bedside table and working off the lid with the hand that isn't rapturously stroking every bit of Will's skin that it can possibly reach. "Tunisian olive oil," he adds in explanation. "Rather a delicacy."

Will makes an amused noise. "How long have you had that in here?"

"How long? Well, obviously – since I first decided that we should find ourselves in circumstance like these."

"Seriously? You've been planning it this whole time?"

"Of course," replies Hannibal, completely unabashed. "Give me your hand, please." He pours a generous amount of oil into his own palm, then puts the bottle down and begins to massage it onto Will's fingers; taking his time and relishing the sensuous way their drenched skin slips and glides as their fingers entwine together. Will, likewise aware of it, gives a small whine and Hannibal kisses his temple. "You're going to help me prepare your body for tonight," he says softly. "And I want you to begin by sliding these beautiful slim fingers inside yourself. I want you to take your time and enjoy it – and I want to watch you. Show me how you like to be touched, what gives you most pleasure."

Will gasps again, which promptly turns into a breathy moan as Hannibal's feet hook round his ankles and draw to the side; forcing Will's legs wide apart and making it impossible to close them again. "I don't know what I like," he finally manages to say. "I've never done that to myself before."

"That does not matter at all," replies Hannibal calmly. "You can discover it now." He tightens his grip on Will's hand then kisses the back of it before gently yet firmly guiding it down

between his legs. “Move a little further this way and tip your head back. Yes, perfect. And keep your eyes open; I want to be able to see you.”

Will gasps a bit louder and then obeys, madly aware of how his legs are starting to quiver and the rapid, staccato reverberation of his pulse in his ears. Then he arches himself against Hannibal’s chest, seeking out reassurance from the contact – the word *anchorage* comes veering into mind – and tries not to think about how utterly debauched and wanton he must look right now: skin glistening with perspiration, head thrown back and hips thrust forward, and the way he can feel his cock lying achingly hard and heavy against his stomach. There’s something deeply exposing about it that goes far beyond the physical and Hannibal, merciless as ever, immediately senses the discomposure. “So excited already,” he says caressingly, leaning forward so he can run the tip of his tongue along Will’s jaw. “Look how wet you are; soaking, in fact – leaking all over yourself.” He takes hold of Will’s other hand and makes him trail his fingers across his abdomen, which is already glistening with a pool of pre-come. “Exquisite,” says Hannibal. “You’re loving this aren’t you? Displaying yourself to me, flaunting your beauty. Showing how desirable and unique you are.”

“No,” says Will, his breath starting to catch. “It’s not…I…oh God.”

“It’s all right, little wild thing,” replies Hannibal in a languid, sensuous tone that goes straight to Will’s groin. “There is no rush; we have all the time we need. Just – slowly. Use your fingertip to begin with. Move it in circles and caress yourself. That’s right; *very* good Will. Aren’t you glad I took the precaution of obtaining the oil? The way it glides across your skin…so beautifully smooth. I can tell just from watching you. In fact I think you’re ready for something more, would you agree? Now press down a little harder and spread your legs. That's it. Oh *yes*, that's perfect.” He kisses Will’s forehead while beginning to suggestively skim his hand across his waist; and Will cries out again, becoming so hopelessly, helplessly excited that he ends up pivoting his hips and ecstatically sliding his index finger deep inside himself without even waiting to be told. Hannibal’s breath catches at the sight of it and he tugs Will’s head even further back and grazes his throat with his teeth.

“Oh God,” gasps Will, frantically rocking his hand and as he works though the initial sting.

“Beautiful,” says Hannibal reverently. “Look at you: exploring yourself so shamelessly. It’s really not taken you long at all has it? One would think you were extremely used to it, as if you did it all the time. How fearless and adaptable you are Will; see how well you can attune to whatever circumstances you find yourself in? Yet the difficulty with that, of course, is habituation: the current provocation grows insufficient, despite the initial stress of it, and you find yourself wanting more. That is the origins of escalation Will…How should we escalate?”

Will groans and shakes his head and Hannibal makes an amused sound. “Not ready to beg yet? It doesn’t matter *mylimasis*; you know I can wait. And in the meantime…” He places his hand on Will’s right arm and begins to slowly glide it downwards, pausing at intervals to inspect the firmness of the muscle and the plane of each bone, before moving over the wrist and finally stoking his hand across Will’s. “Let me help you my darling,” murmurs Hannibal and Will moans loudly and jerks his hips as he feels Hannibal work in a second finger alongside Will’s own. “There, it’s all right,” says Hannibal kissing his temple. “Just relax. Breathe with me. That’s it, good boy. So good for me aren’t you?” Will gasps in response and

Hannibal kisses him again then trails his free hand in the excess oil that's slicked along Will's thigh and gently takes hold of his cock; stroking it in a slow sensuous rhythm and revolving his thumb across the head while maintaining a touch that's continuously light and deft so as not to overwhelm. This time Will makes a sound that's virtually a wail and Hannibal searches out his mouth to kiss him properly before murmuring, "How does that feel?"

"*Fuck*," says Will through gritted teeth. "I like it. Oh God, I really like it…I…*oh*. It feels so good."

"Yes, you enjoy it so much don't you?" replies Hannibal approvingly. "You're so responsive, it's rather captivating. My beautiful boy…I wonder what else you might eventually learn to like?" He shifts his head round so he can begin sucking a bruise into the back of Will's neck, sliding his own finger in perfect rhythm to Will's the entire time while murmuring praise, endearments and encouragement in several different languages. Really, Will feels so lusciously receptive that he could probably take him right now exactly as he is. It would be *so* simple too; merely a matter of catching hold of his waist and lifting him up before slowly lowering him down again. Hannibal's mind briefly mists over at the idea of watching Will's exquisitely tight little virgin hole sliding up and down his cock: the way he'd need to hold onto him to keep him balanced until he grew confident enough to find his own rhythm; and how, in the meantime, Hannibal would have to set the pace by levering him up by the hips, waiting a few seconds – kissing his neck and stroking his waist– before pulling him down again, deep and hard. Then he imagines the sounds Will would make and the way his creamy white skin would grow even more flushed than it is now – and is so badly tempted to go ahead and do it that he actually falters for a few seconds, ultimately only resisting on the grounds that Will can undoubtedly still keep going for a while longer and as such it would be premature to bring the pleasures of the night to an end *quite* so soon. There's also the fact that he would like nothing more than to wrap his lips around Will's cock and spend numerous lingering, lapping, delicious minutes introducing his boy to this particular variety of helpless, shuddering pleasure; but in Will's current state it would almost certainly bring him straight to orgasm, and making love to him when he's writhing with discomfort and miserably over-sensitised is not going to be anywhere near as satisfying as having him ecstatically overwhelmed with sensation of an entirely different kind. So in the end he does take hold of Will's waist, admiring how slender it feels in contrast to the taut firmness of his abdomen, but then merely lifts him out of his lap and lays him down on the bed instead. Will gives a startled gasp at being moved so abruptly and Hannibal spins his own body over Will's, lithe and precise as a jungle cat, and proceeds to kiss him with incredible care and thoroughness that alternates from brutal-hard to tender-gentle.

Will pulls away first, taking a few deep breaths then wrapping his legs round Hannibal's back so he can grind their hips together. His hair's tumbling over his forehead and rather than pushing it off with his hand he twists his mouth up and blows it away instead; which in that moment strikes Hannibal as quite possibly the most charming thing he's ever seen in his life. "All right," says Will wryly. "I'm begging now."

"You are not," replies Hannibal with a small smile. He reaches down with his clean hand and smooths the rest of Will's damp hair out of his eyes, then trails a finger down his cheek and across his lower lip. "You are merely *talking* about doing so; and I am afraid that begging in the abstract is not entirely what I had in mind."

Will gives a half-laugh at this, then closes his eyes and grins before flinging his arms behind his head across the pillow. “You’re impossible,” he says.

“Yes, I dare say; although no more than you. Now stay as you are please, but draw your legs up to your chest. Just like that – perfect. Are you comfortable?”

“I guess so,” replies Will, who’s now growing slightly fretful. “But can’t you just…I don’t know. I just need…”

“It’s all right,” says Hannibal soothingly, noting how Will’s skin is accentuated by the white sheets just as flakes of snow stand out against a light-lit sky. “I know exactly what you need. And you know that you can trust me to take care of you. But I want you to be patient and wait a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

“Oh God, not really,” replies Will. “I just…” Then his words abruptly dissolve into a low moan as Hannibal slides two fingers deep inside him and begins to rub the tips in exquisitely measured circles: still warm and slippery with the oil and gliding in and out with an ease and receptiveness that makes Will feel a rather ecstatic sense of shamelessness.

“Patience,” repeats Hannibal, running his other hand up and down Will’s legs. “Remember what I told you about the virtues of waiting? The anticipation makes the pleasure so much… greater.” He remains like that for a little longer, carefully cataloguing the exact combination of angles and pressure to elicit the loudest sighs and gasps, before leaning down and sliding his tongue around his slowly stabbing fingers. Will gives a helpless wail of pleasure, shuddering so hard his back briefly arches off the bed, and Hannibal makes a soothing sound and renews stroking Will’s hip with his free hand. Then he gently withdraws his fingers and begins to lap his tongue in languid circles interspersed with lingering supple licks and passionate sucks against delicate skin – everything perfectly timed, devotedly done, and all intended to instil the most intense possible pleasure – before narrowing his tongue and beginning to work it inside Will’s beautifully fervid and frantic body; sighing with pleasure himself the entire time at the way he can feel the muscle begin to flutter and then yield almost rapturously to the intrusion. Will cries out at the sensation of being pierced – so mercilessly insistent, and yet so wet and smooth and soft – and then, increasingly desperate and needing something to hold onto, blindly reaches out a hand which Hannibal catches hold of so he can entwine their fingers together; stroking Will’s wrist with his thumb and then moving their joined hands down towards Will’s groin so that he can touch himself. Will moans and shudders again, so Hannibal places a steadying palm on one of his long, slim thighs; now slick with oil and saliva and so warm to the touch it’s as if all the heated excitement is too much to contain internally and is beginning to flow through his skin.

It’s then that he hears Will gasping his name, over and over like a chant, and there’s something about the way it sounds when it’s Will’s voice that’s speaking it which makes Hannibal’s own sense of longing slam into both heart and head with a potency that’s somewhat shocking in its unfamiliarity. And despite his previous resolution to extend the night as long as possible, in that moment he feels beyond all certainty that further delay is simply intolerable: that he needs Will right now, and that Will obviously needs him; and correspondingly that they are in yearning, helpless need of each other. So he pulls away and leans back on his heels, drawing a steadying breath himself while spending a few seconds

reverently running his eyes over Will: taking in the damp flushed skin and the wide eyes, the heat and humidity, the quiet yearning and the outspoken passion, delicately adorable while fiercely and passionately adored…a tangle of limbs, languor and longing with a breathless, heady capacity to fascinate, captivate and inspire. *If you only knew how vital you are to me*, thinks Hannibal with a sudden raw sincerity, *then you would not dare to roam away ever again. You would never leave, never stray; you would allow yourself to be as attached to me as my own shadow, and you would remain by my side for as long as we both have life in us.*

And though it's only supposed to be for a few moments, he finds it temporarily impossible to tear his eyes away, because – just a few seconds more, *just a few*. Only a few more enraptured, agonised moments to simply gaze at…this. This living, breathing paradox. This light and life, problem and solution, all sin yet entirely soul; beautiful and terrible and knowing and unaware, and belonging entirely to Hannibal while simultaneously free and unfettered and impossible to fully take possession of. Will, in turn, glances round then hesitantly begins to pull himself upright, obviously uncertain at the cause of this sudden shift in pace. And there's something so artless and trusting in the way he catches Hannibal's eye and just watches him – so youthful, whole, free, willing, and without any expectation – that's so acute it's almost unbearable. In fact the swell of emotion is deeply unknown and somewhat extraordinary: difficult to typify and pin down and, in a life so impeccably ordered and nuanced, unsettling in its utter uncontrollability. There's only the sense that if Hannibal has always celebrated his mind as the most finely-tuned and impeccably nuanced instrument then this strikingly singular being, this Will Graham – his every thought, mood, action and idea; every expression he has, every time he looks at Hannibal – are like hands that dart across the keys and show neither mercy nor restraint in it. *More than I would have thought possible*, thinks Hannibal with something like wonder as he gazes at Will's face. *More than sense or reason. More than I have words to tell you.*

"What?" asks Will abruptly. "What is it?"

So Hannibal smiles and says "Nothing," even though it's everything – because it feels as if every possible moment has been leading up to this, and what it means, and what could happen after – then reaches out a hand and strokes Will's hair before gently pushing him down again until he's lying on his back. "Are you ready my love?" he adds quietly, keeping his voice deliberately measured and level to disguise how moved he suddenly feels. The craving need to abandon consideration and simply *take* – something primitive and primal to establish ownership – is briefly overpowering, and despite the earlier reassurances he has a fleeting concern that he really is going to hurt Will after all. But Will is now arching his hips towards him, looking almost insanely desirable, and gasping "Please…*please*..." so he lifts up Will's hand and kisses it then reaches towards the table for oil, unable to resist leaning forward one more time on the way back to press their lips together. Will moans softly into his mouth and Hannibal sighs with something that feels as close to worship that he, exultant heretic that he is, has ever managed to experience. *You know what an infidel I am*, he thinks silently to Will. *The idea of sacrificing oneself in the service of faith has always struck me to be as amusing as it is senseless. To be a Martyr, to offer up mind and body in such a way; to offer up autonomy itself; the notion both entertains and appals me. And yet how I find myself wanting to keep faith with you. I would forfeit my entire wellbeing for it; I would allow you to vanquish and overpower me in my devotion. The delirium of one who adores you, yearns for you, envelops and consumes you, both for this life and the next.*

“I want this Hannibal,” Will is now murmuring. He needs to break away to say the words and only seems able to manage it for a few seconds at a time before sliding their mouths together again, arching his back and wrapping both arms round Hannibal’s shoulders to cling onto him. “Please, what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” replies Hannibal quietly. “At least not any more. We’ve both been waiting so long, haven’t we? Before we even knew who we were waiting for.” He cradles Will’s face with his hand and lays a tender kiss on his forehead, then angles his hips back slightly before taking a deep breath and slowly thrusting forward – savouring every single exquisite second of anticipation for what feels as if it might be the most ecstatic moment of his life. Will whimpers slightly as his muscles clench with an instinctive flinch of resistance, and Hannibal makes a soothing sound and strokes his hair. “It’s all right Will,” he says gently. “I have no wish to hurt you.” Will gasps again and pivots his hips further upwards, and Hannibal is aware of his own breath catching as he feels the tenseness beginning to eagerly yield to him and he can sink forward, so sweetly and easily, until he's buried blissfully deep in all the tight slippery-smooth warmth of Will’s body. Will moans over and over again into Hannibal's mouth and Hannibal briefly pulls away to cover his face – eyelids, forehead, cheekbones – with worshipful kisses. “That's it,” he says softly. “*Mano meilė.* I have you now.”

“*Oh*,” says Will in a faint voice. He sounds almost shocked; eyes very wide and lips parted. “Oh, that’s…oh God. I can really *feel* you.”

“And I you, beloved.”

Will arches his back and then makes a groaning noise that seems halfway between a laugh and a sob and Hannibal flicks his eyes over his face for any obvious signs of discomfort. “It hurts?” he asks after a pause.

“No, no, it’s just…God…I didn’t think it would feel like this.”

“And how does it feel?”

“It feels…I don’t know.” Will reaches his hands up, fingers tangling in Hannibal’s hair stingingly tight, and Hannibal turns his head to kiss his wrist. “It feels *right.*”

“I know,” replies Hannibal in an equally low voice. “It could hardly be anything else; a natural result of intimacy and accord.” He pulls back and waits for a few lingering seconds before pushing back in with a deep thrust, rolling his hips and savouring the way it makes Will writhe underneath him, before quoting softly: “*Our souls have long been acquainted. It is only our bodies which are new*.”

Will moans in agreement and then pulls his legs further towards his chest, trying to take it as deep as possible and feeling slightly shameless at the way he can feel his body stretching open with so little resistance as Hannibal takes hold of his waist to give him some extra leverage. He’s so aware of the noises he’s making – fragmented low gasps and high breathy moans – but it’s impossible not to because his entire body feels shot through with sensation. Everything’s grown kinetic. *Incendiary*: as if the air is snapping with electricity…so much heat and need. He never knew desire could be like this, has never experienced this sort of unbridled, untamed passion; and for the first time can understand why Hannibal derives such

sensuous ardour from food because the language certainly corresponds: *hunger, crave, consume, thirst, appetite*. Perhaps it's partly a function of this first time and eventually it'll be calmer and more leisurely, reaching the point where the urgency wears off and they'll take their time and spend patient, tender hours over it – just lying in bed and exploring each other without the frenzied yearning. But that day is not today. It'll take months, maybe years… maybe it will never happen at all. He screws his eyes closed, relishing the pressure of Hannibal's body on his – the way it makes him feel protected; safe and stabilised in a way he normally doesn't know how to be – and can hear someone gasping and isn't sure in that moment whether it's him or whether it's Hannibal, or whether it's both of them: both of them surrendering control together as promised. Then he can feel Hannibal's palm sliding underneath his cock and pressing firmly down on his abdomen, obviously wanting to feel the vibrations from where he's fucking into Will's body, and the sensation of being claimed in this way – which should normally be unsettling and wrong – is now completely intoxicating and Will calls out Hannibal's name over and over and rocks his hips upwards; adoring and frantic and so in love in can barely think.

"That's it," says Hannibal. "You take it so well; my beautiful boy." He leans right back and angles his torso so he can reach down and dig his hands into Will's skin to spread him open, staring almost enthralled at the sight of his cock thrusting so smoothly into this beloved body; impossibly innocent and inexperienced, yet so exquisitely willing and wanting. Will groans rather wantonly when he feels what Hannibal is doing – and intuits why he's doing it – then spreads his legs even wider to provide better access. "So beautiful," repeats Hannibal, spitting onto his thumb so he can rub the stretched, tender rim; and aware, even as he's doing it, that it's not entirely for the purposes of giving pleasure as opposed to just wanting to touch as much of Will as possible.

"Oh fuck, fuck," gasps Will. "You feel incredible. *God*." He reaches out and grips onto Hannibal's arms with both hands, gazing up at him with eyes that are so wide and staring it's straining the muscles in his face, even though he can't bring himself to close them; can't not look. "You feel so good inside me."

"Yes. This pale, slim, scarred and infinitely precious home for the *inside*. Look at you. Look how achingly perfect you are. And so extraordinary, yet so unaware of it." He runs his eyes across Will's face then takes hold of his hand. "You are mine now Will, you belong to me. You belong to me and you are everything." And then he keeps repeating it, like a mantra; as if he can't stop himself, as if he doesn't even fully realize he's doing it: "You are everything Will. You are everything, *everything*."

"Yes," gasps Will. "Oh yes – *yes*." He's beginning to shake in earnest now, unable to fully cope with the feverish intensity of it and moaning with helpless pleasure at the way he can feel himself starting to tighten and quiver as he chases towards orgasm. The sensation actually makes Hannibal feel huge inside him, almost too much to take, and it's all so new and unfamiliar and yet so perfect despite it. "I'm going to come," he says, a bit desperately, "I'm close…I'm really close."

"I know you are my love, I can feel you." Hannibal takes hold of Will's other hand and lifts them both up so they're on either side of his face, tightly held in Hannibal's own. "You can let go now; we can lose ourselves together." He tilts his hips slightly to find the right angle,

smiling at the way it makes Will gasp, then briefly tightens his grip on his right hand before letting go entirely and reaching down to begin stroking his cock again, which is beautifully hot and hard and soaking the taut, smooth skin of his stomach with pre-come. “I want you to let go for me,” he adds in the same low voice. “Let yourself feel it. I want to see you.”

“Yes, yes…I want that.”

“Show me,” says Hannibal.

“*Oh*,” gasps Will, and his voice sounds strained and intense, burning in his ears with a raw urgency he doesn’t entirely recognize. “Oh God, *yes*, oh, oh I’m coming…I’m coming…”

Hannibal feels the hot, wet pulses spilling across his hand and groans himself with a rich vibration deep in his throat – acutely aware that he’s about to go over the edge himself and torn between the need to fully revel in it while not wanting to deflect attention from the sight of Will, reduced to shuddering helpless pleasure beneath him and looking so beautifully wrecked and abandoned it scarcely seems possible that he can be real. He murmurs Will’s name under his breath, reverent and hallowed as if it’s the words of a prayer, then gives his hips a fierce final thrust before dropping forward and pulling Will close to his chest so he can hold him through the aftershocks. “That’s it, that’s it,” he says softly as Will trembles and gasps in his arms. “You were perfect. You did so well.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately: focusing on catching his breath and struggling against the surge of competing emotions before gradually becoming aware that he’s still clinging onto Hannibal’s left hand. Then he briefly feels self-conscious at what seems like a childish gesture before deciding that he doesn’t really care; or at least at enough to let go. *It wasn’t wrong, what we just did*, he thinks to himself. *It couldn’t have been. It wasn’t. It couldn’t be wrong when it felt so instinctively right*. Then he draws a shuddering breath and laughs slightly, suddenly mischievous and high-spirited again. *And captivating,* thinks Hannibal, *and beautiful* (but then everything Will does is captivating; and he is beautiful all the time). “You didn’t do so badly yourself,” says Will between pants before hauling himself round with visible effort so he can rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder; still quivering and seeming like he’s trying to hide how overwhelmed he feels. So Hannibal merely cradles him to his chest and stokes his hair before rubbing soothing circles into his back, smiling with barely concealed satisfaction at the little rumbling purr-like noise such lavishly attentive touches manage to elicit. *You seem so peaceful*, he thinks as he gazes at Will. *More peaceful than I’ve ever seen you: as if all the chaos in your head has fallen silent. Serene and softened and sated and beautiful. And mine*. *This is such a small speck of time – a fleeting moment – destined to be lost and worn away; but I shall never forget how you look right now*. *No matter what darkness and corruption come afterwards I shall remember you this way, and while the loss of it would be unimaginable I would still rather be driven mad by this image of you than not to have it at all. Your perfection in this moment shall haunt me for the rest of my life.*

“So tired,” mutters Will into Hannibal’s shoulder.

Hannibal makes a quiet humming noise in response while reflecting that this is fitting enough; it’s only natural that Will should be exhausted in view of the enormity of what he’s just given Hannibal – without even fully realising either the extent of the gift or its

implications. “Are you?” he adds softly. “Then you should rest. It is, after all, a suitable time for an interval when one considers where we are.” He pauses for a few seconds, silently absorbing the various inferences, before adding: “The commencement of the second act.” There’s something in his tone that sounds weighted – thoughtful and resonant – and it’s enough to make Will glance up, albeit rather sleepily, as if awaiting clarification. “I’ve already alluded to it this evening,” confirms Hannibal, immediately noticing the look. “Transformation. Emergence. The process of becoming.”

“Oh yes,” replies Will. Despite his tiredness the irony in his tone is unmistakable. “My metamorphosis.”

“Indeed. Generally reputed to be arduous and painful – although not inevitably destined to be so. I told you I was prepared to wait for you didn’t I? To wait for as long as it took; how I knew you were worth waiting for. So much potential Will. But a piece of artistry requires infinite time and patience. Just like you with your fishing line, waiting to lure your pray. *Ho visto l'angelo nel marmo e scolpito fino a quando l'ho liberato,”* adds Hannibal softly.

“I don’t know what that means.”

*“*Michelangelo’s words to Benedetto Varchi. In regards to creation; the virtues of patience and vision, and the necessity of waiting: *I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free*.”

“Still addicted to talking in riddles,” says Will, although he sounds fond rather than impatient. “Sometimes I wonder whether even *you* fully understand what you mean.”

But Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, merely smiles into the darkness once again while pulling Will a little closer. “Of course change *may* be painful,” he eventually says. “Who is to say that the marble doesn’t suffer through the sculptor’s endeavours? Even though each blow is inflicted from a place of tenderness and creativity.”

“Great cruelty requires great empathy,” mutters Will, rather bleakly.

“Yes. It does, doesn’t it?” Hannibal leans down and presses his lips against Will’s forehead. “For the sculptor seeks artistry – and beauty – and so acquits himself tirelessly on his creation’s behalf. It would be far easier for him to simply strike the marble to smithereens, to destroy it; but he does not. His compassion becomes inconvenient. His life, his liberty, the performance of his philosophy: all subsumed in his creation’s interests, simply because its’ potential to flourish and prosper within the world grows more dear to him than his own.” He runs his fingertip over Will’s cheekbone. “Eventually I shall explain to you more fully what I mean. Or – which is perhaps more likely – the day will come when you are going to remind me of this conversation yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because that will be the day you finally understand.”

“Understand what?” murmurs Will, who’s now half-asleep. “How am I supposed to know?”

Outside the window the sun is already starting to rise, streaking the sky with scarlet and vermillion like blood on black velvet. *So many contradictions and contrary movements*, thinks Hannibal idly. A new dawn and a new day: the end of one thing, the beginning of something else. The event of *truly* seeing one another and the fact that tonight was only the first fall, with a more fearsome one still to come. And after that? Hannibal runs an appraising eye over the bleeding sky and then returns his gaze to Will. “Believe me my love,” he says softly. “When that time comes…you are going to know.”

Chapter End Notes

Bullshit Quotes Corner

The line about the angel is widely attributed to Michelangelo, although in the interests of full disclosure it’s been romanticized over the years and the words in the original letter are far more pragmatic (to the extent they bear virtually no resemblance to actual quote. Bah). The souls/bodies line quoted by H is a slight tinkering of a quote my friend told me about a few months ago – who in turn got it from a modern romance novel. So it’s not remotely appropriate for the time period but I really liked it so stuck it in anyway :-D

Oh, also: “Mano meilė” = “My love.”

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Please see below for this week's author notes, as I've now exceeded myself and they've rambled so much they rambled right out of the note section and into the actual chapter. Skillz!

But before that…after numerous references to Will going undercover as a prostitute*, carrionofmywaywardwatson has gone one better and drawn it! And it's amazing! So take your lovely selves over to Tumblr for that and many other examples of beautiful Hannibal fanart by a fabulous artist.

* I must say that I am hoping this can be considered my legacy to the fandom: Will as an unfeasibly pretty Victorian prostitute and Hannibal as a nanny from Chapter 12 (aka The Nannibal).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blimey, so sorry for two sets of fic-length author notes in a row my darlings! I've recently been culling a number of Critical Ranting Anonymous People (hereafter known as CRAPs) from the comment section, but behind the shouty capslocks some legitimate queries have been reoccurring in a way which made me wonder if other readers might be thinking the same. As such I've finally decided to address the whole lot directly and clarify some of the choices in this fic.

Firstly, Will's age is not an attempt to infantalize him but simply reflects the era the story is set. Average life expectancy for a middle class man in the 1880s was 35-40 and so it was common for people to hold positions of responsibility at a younger age than they do today. Someone of H's social status would have a better outlook although I deliberately didn't specify how old he's meant to be, so just imagine him at whatever age you like :-) Likewise W is more emotionally vulnerable here than the S1 canon version, but this is also a reflection of what I felt would be plausible for a man of his background in the C19th. I do my best to keep him in character, but the AU elements necessarily influence how he's written (unlike H, who is the most manipulative of charming bastards no matter what century you stick him in).

In turn I didn't portray W as sexually inexperienced to imply naivety, but as another result of the time period. Beyond using prostitutes, which didn't fit my personal interpretation of the character, someone from his background would realistically have to be married in order to have had sex; and this thing is already so long that I wasn't keen on writing a whole marriage backstory. Similarly – although again, I accept that this is only my opinion – I didn't envisage W as having casual gay sex (which in itself was a risky and difficult thing to do in the Victorian era) and so chose not to incorporate that.

*And speaking of which! I'm a cis woman so accuracy can only ever go so far, but I'm fully aware that some aspects of the love scenes are not 100% realistic – however they were never intended to be. I know courtesy of a dear friend of mine who's gay (and shares waaay too much information when he's drunk) that while everything here is plausible on one level (seriously…waaay too much information), it's unlikely, although not impossible, that an inexperienced man would respond in some of the ways described. So yes, I do know this, but still chose to opt out of total realism because I wanted to emphasise the ecstatic element, the emotional connection and as a metaphor for W being highly attuned to H *massive wink * However that's not the same as claiming they're outright unrealistic, which I don't think is entirely fair.*

*Finally: the length of them *cough, wink, OMG* as some people think it's excessive for these scenes to last entire chapters. I totally respect personal preferences for this type of material and so am not suggesting for a second that it's not valid to feel this way. However, I would like to put it from my perspective: which is while these chapters are undoubtedly very E-rated, the explicit material actually only takes up a minority of the word count. For me, a critical element in writing them is the psychological/emotional dynamic, plus character and plot development; and this is the reason they end up so long rather than being explicit just for the sake of it (not that there's anything wrong with that either of course!).*

TLDR = Dear Internet, please don't judge me for my overly long love scenes of dubious realism with just-turned-25 Sassy Victorian Will ;-D PS. No side effects.

Phew! Right, on with the fic. Hope you enjoy this chapter and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it if so, otherwise take good care and see you all soon for the next one. MissDis x

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In the raw misty light of the morning a wiry figure, well-muffled against the biting cold, is striding his way down Fleet Street. His black greatcoat has turned green with age, his right shoe is missing a buckle, and just as his formerly brown hair is now white his once white teeth are now brown. But he still exudes an air of pompous self-importance; and despite passing a parade of gleaming office fronts where men far wealthier and better educated than he operate a journalistic empire that is renowned throughout the world, he holds his head high and swaggers with a hint of complacency on the worn-down shoes. In his professional capacity he is the porter for *The Tattle Crime*: yet despite the fact it is payday tomorrow, and Christmas is not too far away (bringing with it the promise of a generous bonus; the editor having to compensate for his chronic bloody-mindedness towards the staff somehow), he is not in the best of humours. Specifically this is owing to the fact that he's been forced to leave the relative warmth of his bed and come down to the office at an ungodly hour to check on reports of a disturbance during the night. The message had reached him through a convoluted route: a local drayman remarking on wisps of smoke curling from a first floor window; who had then fetched a passing policeman; who had been unable to see any smoke himself but, obviously feeling the need to be seen to take action, had sent a courier to the home of the editor; who in turn had sent the courier to the porter's own house with an imperious demand to go and inspect the premises. The porter now gives a contemptuous snort at a mental image of the editor rolling over in bed, like a pig wallowing in its sty, and returning to a contented, well-fed, piggish sleep while he himself is obliged to tramp through the streets on what's

undoubtedly going to prove a fool's errand. His sense of grievance is further inflamed by the thought of the editor settling into the fragrant arms of his beautiful wife, a wealthy textiles heiress from the north of England, whose angelic golden ringlets and rosebud mouth are objects of veneration amongst every red-blooded male on *The Tattle Crime* payroll. The idea that the editor's wife can't possibly be contented with such a boorish braggart of a husband – and no doubt secretly loathes him as much as everyone else – usually provides a degree of consolation for the porter's irritated envy; but even that is proving cold comfort on such a stingingly black and bitter morning.

"Lazy bugger," mutters the porter under his breath as he fumbles with the lock. *The Tattle Crime* occupies the very last building on the row and is somewhat seedier and less salubrious than the surrounding premises – like a rotten tooth in an otherwise immaculate mouth – but none of the staff are much concerned about it because obtaining offices in Fleet Street was a such a spectacular boost to the paper's status that they could run it out of a dog kennel and as long as the postcode was EC4 then no one would care. Unfortunately though it does mean inconveniences like this: impossible, for example, to imagine *The London Times* possessing a lock so temperamental that the door won't open. The porter swears out loud, rattles the handle, and then gives the door a hefty kick for good measure; and it's only when he wrenches the key back round and hears the clicking of the mechanism that he realises he's actually just fastened the door himself – meaning that it's been left open all night and whoever was the last to leave forgot to lock up.

The porter gives a long hiss of annoyance, only cheering up slightly at the thought of the serious trouble that someone other than himself is about to get into. One of those young reporters no doubt, so eager to get to the nearest public house that he waltzed out the building without securing it. The porter, a proud father of five blooming daughters, has an intrinsic dislike of young men and finds their exuberance and uncouthness to be a constant source of irritation: like puppies that haven't been housebroken. In fact he'll make sure he has a few well-chosen words with the culprit himself. Admittedly this is putting himself a little above his station, but he feels entitled given the inconvenience the oversight has caused him; not to mention the enormous risk to the safety of the premises. In fact most likely a tramp has broken in during the night and the smoke was from a hastily constructed fire. The porter mentally rubs his hands at the thought, and hopes that the tramp has caused substantial damage – enough, with any luck, to ensure dismissal of the offending reporter.

The building is extremely quiet inside, save for the usual eerie shriek from the printing press, and while there's no obvious signs of disturbance an unmistakable stench of burning hangs in the air. The porter lingers in the foyer and strains his ears for any signs of life before shouting "Who's there?" in a suitably forbidding tone of voice. As an afterthought he adds "I have the police with me, so don't you try anything!" but the only answer is the droning machinery and an echoing *thud thud thud* from where an open window is banging in the breeze. There's a frenzied monotony about the sound, like someone pounding their head against the wall, which grates on the porter's nerves and he abruptly crosses the room and draws the window shut with a sharp click. Then he waits a few more moments, uncomfortably aware of how his bravado is beginning to trickle away now that he's stranded, solitary and uncertain, in all this lonely gloom. He takes a step forwards, falters once more, then casts his eyes over the nearby desks before seizing a large glass paperweight. Then he nods with grim satisfaction because

if the need arises it could undoubtedly serve as an effective bludgeoning weapon: weighty and solid, and substantial enough to crush a man's skull.

The reek of burning is far stronger in this part of the building and the porter realises that, consistent with the drayman's report, its source must be the offices on the first floor. Silently he creeps up the stairwell, ears pricking and eyes peering, the paperweight held aloft and primed to come crashing down should circumstances require it. Then he slinks noiselessly along the landing, following the scorched stench like a scent hound trailing its prey until he reaches the point of its greatest intensity: the office of Freddy Lounds. Then he grits his teeth, takes a deep breath, and flings the door wide open.

"I've brought the police," yells the porter once more. And then for a few seconds there's nothing, nothing at all, until the silence is abruptly broken by the crash of the paperweight falling from his convulsing fingers and tumbling to the floor.

Mrs Elizabeth Davis, charwoman for *The Daily Sentinel*, will later tell police that she knew something was wrong when she saw the way the porter came tearing out into the street. "He's boldfaced, that one," she says to the sergeant. "I've known him over five years now and never once has he been anything less than bold and brazen. But Lord, when he came out that building he looked like someone who had seen Old Nick." She shudders and crosses herself, and the sergeant nods sympathetically because he knows that what she really means is the Devil.

But all this comes later and as it is the porter has no idea that he's being observed: is not aware of anything except raw, vicious terror and the overpowering need to flee. Retching and shaking he runs down the stairs so fast he stumbles when he reaches the bottom and gives his ankle a vicious wrench, but insensible to the pain he springs to his feet again and continues to run. Runs across the office as the printing press wails in the background, runs down the corridor and through the foyer: runs, runs, runs for his life and suffused the entire time with a frantic keening howl that's threatening to burst out from his lungs like vomit. But it's not until he's outside again, down on his knees in the middle of the street, that he really begins to scream in earnest.

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As the sun rises high in the sky and the fog slinks away to lie in wait for nightfall, London is beginning to grind into life while the city's inhabitants prepare themselves for another day. Over in Harley Street Mary knocks discreetly on the bedroom door and, on receiving no response, leaves her tray outside and silently returns downstairs; unaware that Hannibal has heard the knock and is actually fully awake. Will, on the other hand, is not; and as such Hannibal has determined to take advantage of this fact as a covert opportunity to scrutinise his sleeping boy: currently draped across the bed with his head on Hannibal's chest and looking as sculptured, elongated and gloriously loose-limbed in the pale morning light as the favourite model of Raphael or Michelangelo. Hannibal gently smooths his hair out of his eyes and Will, without waking up, makes a very faint whimpering noise and leans into the touch. There's a smattering of bruises on his throat, faintly purple like violets, and Hannibal doesn't need to see his hips to know that corresponding ones will be speckled there too. He now traces a thoughtful finger over the marks, noting the quick healthy thrum from the

carotid artery and the rather delightful abrasiveness of Will's stubble, so different to the velvety softness of his hair. Will, vaguely aware of the touch through the blockade of sleep, makes another faint noise and flexes his neck.

"Hush *mylimasis*," says Hannibal softly. "Be still."

There is something inspiring about Will, Hannibal decides. Something rousing. He has a rare quality about him which makes one want to endeavour on his behalf in an attempt to earn his notice and recognition: to perform feats of valour or extravagant displays of devotion – of *spectacle* – in which the more extreme the better. Some manner of *mise-en-scène* which flaunts conventional rules and rubrics and that reverses the usual order of things. A desecration in a church, for example: contorted death in the midst of sacred life, like the archetypal Bleeding Heart. Or an entwined enigma of morality and mortality whose pieces are comprised of lifeless bodies and over which Will can fixate his beautiful dark mind. The desire to win his favour. It's not dissimilar to the medieval ballads of knights slaying some mythological beast for the sake of laying the dripping head at their loved one's feet, as with Tristen slaying the dragon for Isolte. Although on consideration it's perhaps at this point that the analogy fails after all, because Will is not remotely suited to such a passive role: and how much better, indeed, to move in equal partnership while performing such an enterprise as dragon slaying. Like two halves of a single whole – purposeful disarray and dark mirror image. Hannibal idly strokes Will's face with one hand and then thinks back to the red dragon in the Blake painting: its sinister symbolism and complex implication that good and evil are a duality rather than independent forces, like the dark and light sides of the moon.

Will is now moving again in his sleep, frowning slightly and arching his back, and Hannibal promptly transfers his attention from this mentally constructed Will back to the version that's here right now: so pale, perfect and ferociously adorable in the faint, blanched light of the winter sun. *My exquisite little whore*, thinks Hannibal rapturously. Not that he would ever say this to Will, even though it's not remotely intended as an insult. On the contrary it's high praise in Hannibal's construction of the sentiments underlying the word – that Will is someone sufficiently spirited and audacious to place the pursuit of pleasure and natural human need over society's pointlessly confining, fastidious rules. Hannibal gives a small sigh at the tiresome constraints of language: a philosophy of mind in which simple concepts combine in systematic ways to create all manner of ludicrous representations. Then he turns this train of thought over several times in his mind before rapidly losing interest in it (being premised, as it is, on how regrettably dull-witted and unimaginative most people tend to be) and runs his eyes over Will once more instead.

How beautifully sensual he looks like this. Carnal, one might say. In this respect – and while admittedly far less interesting than psychological deconstruction – the possibilities for physical exploration are extensive and intriguing, because Will clearly finds a measure of consolation in discarding restraint and self-control and losing himself in sensation. This would be something requiring careful guidance and management (at least initially, although he's confident that Will is soon going learn to master his own needs) and might usefully involve a level of devolution in order for Will to push past his boundaries and emerge even more daring and uninhibited as a result. A process of physical abandonment to complement the extending mental horizons: dissemble down to the essentials; deconstruct; review; reconstruct. Hannibal closes his eyes and permits himself a brief yet extremely beguiling

fantasy about what it would be like to have Will living in the house on a permanent basis and what very interesting things might be attempted as part of this endeavour. For example he is well aware of the existence of phallic toys (sold secretly yet widely available if one knows where to look) which are handcrafted from the softest leather and which, with the right amount of oiling, could easily be worked into his boy's slim body. Hannibal's mind clouds over at the idea of tying Will to the bed afterwards and leaving him, in increasingly pained ecstasies, to await Hannibal's return to remove it and take care of him properly. How flushed and desperate he would look, the way he would beg; the slow dismantling of reticence and inhibition.

Not that you would ever tolerate that, amends Hannibal ruefully, running an affectionate finger over the stubborn little frown line which even in sleep is clearly apparent between Will's eyebrows. No doubt he'd yell the house down first or, more likely, simply contrive a way to escape the bonds; probably wrecking the bed, or even the entire bedroom, in the process. No, duress would never succeed (and even if it did, couldn't possibly be as gratifying as seeing Will express a readiness to be debauched). Persuasion, on the other hand…there might be something in that. Will might well prove amenable to being *seduced* into trying such a thing?

Will is now stirring slightly and Hannibal promptly loses interest in this train of thought as well; because as captivating as all these mental versions manage to be, none of them can compete with the presence of the living breathing version. Then he watches, almost unbearably charmed, as Will arches himself against Hannibal's chest like someone seeking closeness and reassurance. As with last night the wave of tenderness this creates is powerfully unfamiliar, and Hannibal sighs very quietly on behalf of them both as he waits for Will to wake up.

This actually takes some time, as Will makes an intimation of fighting his way into consciousness like someone struggling their way out of a net. *Always fighting something*, thinks Hannibal fondly. "Morning," Will finally says, his voice thick with tiredness.

"Good morning."

"Time?" asks Will, who's clearly finding full sentences something of a trial.

"Nearly seven o'clock."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I was hoping you were going to say five," says Will plaintively. "I need *at least* another two hours."

"You look as if you need more than that."

Will makes a rather anguished groaning noise and scrubs his hands across his face before peering up at Hannibal from over his fingers. "I hope you didn't mind me staying here all night?" he says cautiously.

“Don’t be foolish,” replies Hannibal in a brisk voice. “You know I don’t mind.”

“Right…okay.” Will disappears behind his fingers before briefly remerging again. “Thanks.”

Hannibal smiles to himself and then reaches up to pull Will’s hands away. “So how do you plan to occupy yourself today?” he asks. “I assume you need to go out at some point?”

“Scotland Yard,” replies Will, cheering up slightly because he was dreading some manner of excruciating post-mortem over what happened last night and is extremely relieved that it looks like it’s not going to happen. “Meetings.”

“Tedious,” says Hannibal, with some feeling.

“Very, but I need to go.” Will stretches rather luxuriously then runs his hands through his hair, tentatively allowing himself to enjoy the complete lack of awkwardness which he’d been certain would hover in the air this morning like smoke. Some toxic combination of embarrassment, recrimination or regret – but it’s really not like that. Then he tries to identify what’s there in its place, and finally decides that it’s a warm sense of intimacy that’s distinctly charged yet undoubtedly casual. In fact there’s almost something contradictory about it: like a couple with honeymoon ardency who’ve in fact been married for decades. He prods Hannibal’s foot with his own. “Are you coming as well?”

“Not immediately. I have a few things to do first.”

Will nods in response then reluctantly climbs out the bed and wraps a blanket round himself, staggering about a bit aimlessly in an attempt to wake up before making a half-hearted attempt to locate his clothes.

“If you intend to steal one of my shirts again,” says Hannibal, who’s watching him fondly, “then make sure you find one that has been ironed.”

“It’s a shame I can’t iron my face,” replies Will, critically inspecting his pallid reflection in the mirror. “I look wrecked. Like seven shades of shit.” He glances over his shoulder: Hannibal smiles beatifically. “You know this is the point where you’re supposed to contradict me, right? It’s the point where you’re supposed to look horrified and exclaim ‘My dear Will, what on earth are you talking about. You look fucking *radiant*.’”

“I could indeed say that, most dearest of Wills,” replies Hannibal serenely. “But I would be lying.”

“Mr Crawford’s going to give me hell.” Will peers closer into the mirror, prodding the smudged purple shadows beneath both eyes. “He’ll assume I’ve been out all night drinking.”

“Very possibly. What *are* you going to tell him when he asks why you’ve clearly not slept?”

“What do you think I’m going to tell him? The truth? ‘Sorry, what’s that you say Mr Crawford? Seven shades of shit, sir? Well, pull up a chair and let me explain about the copious amounts of illegal sex I spent all last night having.’”

Hannibal smirks and then stretches him arms behind his head. “That would probably not be advisable. Although I suspect that even if such a conversation *did* take place then Jack Crawford would turn a determinedly blind eye to it. He is clearly very fond of you and wants to protect your interests as far as he can.” He smiles again. “Like a well-meaning if rather condescending uncle.”

“Well if it’s all right with you, I still have no plans to confide in my well-meaning yet condescending Uncle Jack,” replies Will, shuddering at the thought of it. “You could always confide in him yourself of course – he might decide he wants to be your uncle as well. What time do you think you’re likely to arrive?”

“I am not sure yet. Possibly mid-afternoon.”

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing patients.”

Will finishes fastening his shirt then comes back and sits on the edge of bed and narrows his eyes slightly. “What *else* are you doing?”

“Why do you imagine I would be doing anything else?”

“Your face – I know that look. It means you’re plotting something.”

“What look?” says Hannibal innocently.

“*That* look. It’s as shifty as hell.” Hannibal’s smile broadens. “Fine, don’t tell me. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Of that I have absolutely no doubt at all.”

“Ha – so you *are* plotting something.”

Hannibal tries, and fails, to not look amused and then affectionately ruffles Will’s hair. “Stay there a moment,” he says. “I have something for you.” Will raises his eyebrows questioningly and then watches, intrigued, as Hannibal leans over and opens the drawer of the bedside table in order to retrieve a small velvet box.

“For me?” says Will. “What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

Will smiles, awkward yet pleased, then gives a small gasp as he discovers an antique filigree tie pin: exquisitely worked and intricately woven together with slim silver threads and embellished with a delicate cluster of gemstones along the edge. There’s something slightly baroque about it, as if it would be most at home at the throat of a Restoration aristocrat or nestled amongst lace and court plaister on some Italian *Cavaliere* – and it’s opulent yet tasteful and beautiful and arresting, and without a doubt is the most magnificent thing that Will has ever possessed. “It’s *wonderful*,” says Will slightly breathlessly. “Thank you so much.”

“I would like you to wear it today. You can abandon it from then on; I appreciate it is not very compatible with your usual style. But humour me – just for today.”

“Yes, of course,” says Will, “whatever you like.” Then he ducks his head slightly and turns the pin round with his fingers, marvelling at the fact he now owns something which is clearly of museum quality yet likewise beset by a sense of inadequacy at not being in a position to reciprocate with something equally splendid.

Hannibal catches the look and, having immediately interpreted what it means, tugs Will towards him and murmurs into his ear: “You gave me yourself.”

Will suspects he’s now starting to blush so buries his face in Hannibal’s neck to hide it before sliding downwards and rearranging himself more comfortably with his head tucked beneath Hannibal’s chin. Then he just lies there for a while, tapping an absent-minded rhythm onto Hannibal’s shoulder blade with his finger and enjoying how natural and comfortable everything feels. Well, not *quite* everything. “Your collar bones are still awful,” says Will. “In fact if anything they’ve got worse.”

“Oh yes, indeed. ‘Like lying on a sack of spanners’ as I recall.”

“Well now it’s like being hit in the face with the spanners.”

“How tragic for you; it appears that you were born to suffer. A true martyr in fact…perhaps your Uncle Jack will light a candle for you at Scotland Yard.”

“Perhaps,” replies Will. “Although speaking of which, I really should leave soon.”

“I am afraid so.”

“I’d rather stay here.”

“I know. I would rather you stayed here.”

“At least it won’t be long,” says Will forlornly. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“It may be less than that – if I am able to come to Scotland Yard.”

“They’d be pleased to see you,” replies Will vaguely; aware that he should finish getting ready but reluctant to move *quite* yet. He finally stops the tapping movement and gives Hannibal a light prod instead. “Why is your skin so brown in the winter?”

“Is it?” Hannibal inspects his forearm thoughtfully. “I am not so tanned as all that.”

“You are compared to me.”

“That is hardly to the purpose my love; I have seen corpses with more vigorous complexions than you have.”

“Great, thanks,” says Will. “I’m not *remotely* offended by that – just in case you were wondering. Anyway how many corpses have you seen?”

“A great many,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “I am a doctor after all.”

“You know, that’s not a particularly good advert for your services: ‘*You’re in safe hands with Dr Lecter – he’s seen lots of corpses*.’ I’d rather have a doctor who hadn’t seen *any*.” Will finally hauls himself upright and Hannibal draws his knees up to his chest so Will can lean forward and rest his elbows on them until their faces are nearly touching. “You do have slightly olive skin though,” Will adds. “Just a bit.”

“I suppose so. Most of my family members were the same.”

“Were?” repeats Will, immediately noticing the past tense. And then, when Hannibal doesn’t elaborate, “Are any of your family still…are you still in contact with any of them?”

“One or two.”

“Do they live in England as well?”

“No.”

“So where are you from originally?” asks Will, suddenly overcome with curiosity.

Hannibal briefly looks inscrutable and then trails a finger across Will’s wrist. “That is rather a long story,” he says, “and probably best reserved for another time.”

“As long as all that?”

“Probably longer.”

“But it’s such a simple question.”

“It is, but the response is complex. Or least a proper account of it would be; and if I am going to describe it to you I would rather provide the full version or none at all. And some time I will – but not today.”

Will doesn’t reply immediately and instead falls silent for a few moments while he tries to imagine it: Hannibal as a solemn dark-eyed little boy with an angular face and obscure impulses, eking out an existence in some foreign land and no doubt unknowable and unfathomable to all the adults around him. Then he briefly thinks of his own childhood in America: the nomadic aimlessness of it, constantly packing up and trekking off as his father trudged from one shipyard to another in pursuit of the next pay cheque. The emptiness, the restlessness…the yearning for someone to really relate to. All the hollow pockets of emptiness waiting to be filled. His wifeless father with the motherless son, working all hours and so often either silent or shouting: exhausted, preoccupied and consumed with a dated, worn-out sadness that disappeared every evening in a nimbus of diesel and resin and resignation.

“Were you happy?” he says abruptly.

If Hannibal is surprised by this sudden change in tone then he gives no indication. “After a fashion,” he replies with another small pause. “At least at times. Although it is not always

merely a question of being happy or unhappy; things are as they are, and one must adapt to the circumstances. Life is a constant process of acclimatisation."

Once again he fails to elaborate, and after waiting for a response that's clearly not going to materialise Will finally says: "I don't agree."

Hannibal smiles faintly. "No?"

"No. You can't just dismiss an entire section of your life as a process of adaptation."

"You think not?"

"No, because people are constructed by their pasts. Their history. It makes them who they are."

"Then I'm afraid I must disagree in turn."

"Why?"

"Because nothing *made* me Will…" replies Hannibal calmly as he runs his eyes over Will's face. "I made myself."

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Once Will has left Hannibal takes a leisurely breakfast then spends several hours in his consulting room where he is obliged to suffer through a series of wealthy patients who all seem determined to outline their assorted ailments in self-indulgently tedious detail. Hannibal diagnoses and dispenses with the usual quick efficiency then ushers them out one by one with charming briskness until the clock strikes eleven and the last one has departed; upon which he envelops himself in a long dark coat and top hat and vanishes silently from the house in order to take a cab to Kensington. Although his destination is Lexham Gardens he instructs the driver to stop in Lexham Mews in order to walk the rest of the way – moving quickly and purposefully, and as striking in his dark clothes as a living shadow in the middle of the day – in order to give the impression to any chance observers of having arrived on foot. Then he locates the house he wants and gives the bell a vigorous tug, smiling very faintly before neatly arranging his features into a calm complacent mask as soon as he hears the door being unlocked.

"Why, Dr Lecter," exclaims Dr Chilton: surprised, but clearly not displeased, to have such a distinguished visitor materialise on his doorstep. "This *is* an unexpected pleasure. To what do I owe the honour of seeing you here?" The last part of this statement is spoken in a distinctly oily, unctuous way; the implication clearly being that Dr Chilton believes himself to have attained superior status by being the recipient, rather than the instigator, of a private house call.

"Nothing in particular," replies Hannibal. "It is more of a social visit than anything else. I needed to purchase some items from the Grosvenor pharmacy and decided to drop by on the way back to Harley Street. After all, seeing as we are colleagues now it makes sense to

become better acquainted…Not that we are *complete* strangers of course; it goes without saying that your reputation precedes you."

Hannibal smiles benignly and Dr Chilton, unaware that this is in fact a reference to his reputation for epic idiocy, beams in a self-satisfied way before ushering Hannibal into the sitting room. As is common with Georgian houses the doorways are rather low and narrow and Hannibal, who's too tall to fit beneath the beam, neatly ducks his head in order to avoid it. Dr Chilton, who's less tall (but reluctant to acknowledge the fact) ducks unnecessarily and then proceeds to make an extensive fuss over sending his maid to fetch refreshments while Hannibal settles himself into a chair and flicks his eyes around the room. The décor – pale gold and cream with lots of Hepplewhite furniture, an Aubusson rug, and some very good watercolours hung above the fireplace – is beautiful, and far too subtle for Dr Chilton's taste. Hannibal deduces the services of an interior decorator, or possibly the discerning eye of a Mrs Chilton, and then steeples his fingers in front of his face and bides his time while Dr Chilton takes a seat opposite and launches into an account of a fundraising dinner for his asylum that was recently held at the Mayfair Hotel. The narrative is distinguished only by being unfeasibly long, horrifically boring, and being unfortunately garnished with every conceivable pointless detail; including a painstaking rendition of all the flattering observations that were made about Dr Chilton's new frock coat and all the *frightfully* witty remarks which Dr Chilton made to the Chief Superintendent's wife.

Hannibal takes a delicate sip of his coffee and entertains a brief yet endearing image of Dr Chilton's stuffed and seasoned face, finally brought to silence and noiselessly simmering in a *Le Creuset* braiser. "How diverting," he says with impeccably feigned interest.

"Of course mental hygiene *is* the new frontier," replies Dr Chilton smugly. "The great and the good are simply falling over themselves to donate to me."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes. You must let me know if you wish to apply to join the Board yourself. I would certainly give your case every possible consideration."

"How very good of you," replies Hannibal, selecting Figaro's aria from *The Barber of Seville* as a suitably jaunty soundtrack for his mental image before adding some fennel to the braiser and giving everything a vigorous stir. "Such commitments make it even more impressive that you have devoted so much time to the Whitechapel investigation."

"Well one does what one can, of course." Dr Chilton pauses and his flushed, prosperous face takes on a sudden crafty expression; not unlike a weasel that's spent all morning in Fortnum and Mason. "Of course the two can *occasionally* be combined," he adds, thoughtfully inspecting his fingernails while darting the occasional sly look at Hannibal from beneath his eyelashes. "The presence of Mr Graham for example…"

Hannibal, who can curse fearfully, internally and at length in several different languages now proceeds to do so; although not a flicker of his expression indicates his extreme irritation at hearing Dr Chilton presume to discuss Will. "The presence of Mr Graham?" he repeats politely.

“A *most* singular case study, wouldn’t you agree? Potentially…career making.”

“Potentially,” replies Hannibal. He smiles serenely and then waits to see what Dr Chilton is going to do next; patient, unwavering and in full observance of the adage ‘give them enough rope to hang themselves with.’

“If one were able to *study* him,” prompts Dr Chilton with a hint of impatience.

“Yes, Mr Graham is certainly very unique,” replies Hannibal airily. “He has a degree of intelligence and perception which are quite remarkable.”

Too much admiration for anyone other than himself unsettles Dr Chilton, and after a slightly pouting interval he reluctantly gives up and considers a need to change the subject; not least because Hannibal is obviously far too dim to pick up on his subtly ingenious hints about the desirability of obtaining Will and therefore – at least at this point – appears an unlikely confederate for arranging a forced committal. Although, amends Dr Chilton, cheering up slightly, at least this conversation could be seen as preparing the groundwork; setting the scene, as it were. And in retrospect it’s probably best not to show one’s hand *too* early. After all, there’s still plenty of time to scatter further suggestive seeds and it’s not as if Will’s going anywhere in the meanwhile. *The little beast*, adds Dr Chilton, ruefully reflecting on the damage sustained by his formerly flawless nose. Then he mentally applauds himself for such formidable cunning and takes a satisfied bite of his *mille-feuille*, fastidiously licking the sugar off his fingers and completely unaware of Hannibal’s eyes boring into the top of his head. “I suppose we’ll see what transpires in due course,” he finally says out loud. “At any rate Jack Crawford can hardly fail to realise that he’s a liability to the investigation; all those ridiculous American notions.”

“What will be even more interesting,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely voice, “is whether Mr Crawford intends to annex Mr Graham’s insights in the same manner that I suspect he is going to appropriate ours.”

“Appropriate my insights!” shrieks Dr Chilton, nearly choking on his *mille-feuille.*

“I should not be at all surprised. Mr Crawford knows what he is about.”

“What do you mean?” demands Dr Chilton, flinging the *mille-feuille* onto his plate with unnecessary violence, as if imagining it to be Jack Crawford's head.

“Simply this: that he is going to side-line the medical input when this individual is finally apprehended and emphasise the police contribution instead. Mark my words – he intends to carefully curate our level of involvement to suit his purposes.”

“Good Lord. Do you really think so?”

Hannibal opens his dark eyes very wide and pins Dr Chilton in place with one of his most soulfully innocent stares: ‘Just look at my *face,*’ the stare says. ‘Would this face *lie* to you?’ “I do think so,” adds Hannibal after a suggestive pause. “Consider, for example, how he forbade you from attending the surveillance operation – even when you were so prompt in volunteering your services.”

“Why yes, that’s true,” says Dr Chilton indignantly. “He was *very* quick to tell us we couldn’t go.”

“Naturally he was. It is as I said: he is going to exploit our knowledge and expertise in a way that is most profitable for himself and his colleagues.” He pauses and gives Dr Chilton a significant look. “For example, if Jack the Ripper turns out to be left-handed then I should not be at all surprised if Mr Crawford tells the press that he favoured that theory all along.”

“I have no doubt of it!” hisses Dr Chilton, bristling under the weight of this long-standing grievance. “No wonder he was so quick to deter us from any field involvement. He wants us to remain obediently in Scotland Yard like…like…like a pair of *ladies*,” concludes Dr Chilton with venom.

Hannibal can’t help raising his eyebrows at this rather unlikely analogy, but simply replies: “Indeed.”

“They’ll be out again tonight, I suppose,” adds Dr Chilton mutinously. “And no doubt congratulating themselves on having excluded us. Mr Graham especially.”

“I don’t suppose they shall be as blatant about it as all that. It is hardly in their interests to gloat after all, considering the poor publicity that would result if journalists became aware. No, Mr Crawford will merely keep emphasising the safety aspect and insist that he is adopting the most responsible course of action by keeping us away.”

“You aren’t tempted to go yourself?” says Dr Chilton beadily.

“Me?” replies Hannibal with a little simulated shudder. “Certainly not. Dashing around Whitechapel with the police in the middle of the night is hardly my forte. I confess, in this particular complaint I am imitating Aesop’s dog in its manger – I have no particular wish to join them, but still resent the prohibition to have a chance to do so.”

Dr Chilton frowns for a few seconds, impatiently drumming his fingers on the armrest and completely oblivious to the faintest flicker of a smile that’s begun to play around Hannibal’s mouth. “Upon my word,” he finally says. “I’m of a mind to rout Jack Crawford’s scheme and join them anyway.”

Hannibal leans forward in his chair with an expression of courteous concern. “I’ll be candid with you Frederick,” he says, “I think that would be extremely ill-advised.”

Because you’re too afraid to go yourself, thinks Dr Chilton triumphantly, *and so want to ensure I stay away too and likewise don’t get any credit*. *Well it’s too late my friend, you’ve said it now – you can back-peddle all you like*. Out loud he says: “I ought to tell Jack Crawford exactly what I think of his little conspiracy.”

“You can confront him if you wish, although I do not intend to do so myself. In situations like these I find there to be greater benefit in possessing information of which one’s opponent is unaware." Hannibal gives another lingering, Sphinx-like smile. "It confers a certain tactical advantage.”

“Hmm. You might be right,” says Dr Chilton grudgingly.

Hannibal nods his head, as if deeply gratified to have the honour of being deemed right by Dr Chilton, and then abruptly gets to his feet. “Well this has been a very pleasant interlude,” he says, “but I’m afraid my afternoon surgery begins in half an hour and I need to return to Harley Street.”

“You won’t stay for luncheon?”

“Thank you for the offer, but no.”

So Dr Chilton likewise stands up and insists on escorting Hannibal to the door with a solicitous hand on the shoulder, which it takes considerable self-control for Hannibal not to shake off (or, for that matter, break off). “Shall we expect you at the meeting today?” adds Dr Chilton, interrupting this entertaining train of thought as Hannibal retrieves his coat from the stand in the corridor.

“What meeting is that?” asks Hannibal, who’s already fully aware but wants to cultivate Dr Chilton’s illusion of self-importance.

“Oh didn’t they *tell* you? How terribly discourteous. Although don’t be cast down about it, doubtless it was only an oversight.”

“No doubt.”

“And you are very new to the investigation,” adds Dr Chilton with his little laugh. “So I suppose it’s understandable that they prioritised informing me. Nothing at all to take *offence* over,” he adds with oozing concern, despite the fact that Hannibal has given no indication of offence being taken. “As it happens it’s a progress meeting: part of the new initiative in addition to the strategy meetings.”

“I shall try to look in later if I have time.”

“Splendid.”

Hannibal adjusts his coat and then pauses with one hand on the door handle. “And Frederick?”

“Yes?”

“Do consider what I said about not going to Whitechapel.”

“I shall certainly *consider* it,” replies Dr Chilton, with what he imagines is a tone that’s rich and resonant with intrigue. Then he waves Hannibal off and closes the door with a triumphant smile – completely unaware that Hannibal is walking away from the house and towards his waiting cab with a smile that’s far more lethally satisfied.

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Despite his tiredness Will spends the journey to Scotland Yard with a dreamy smile on his face, happily preoccupied with his own thoughts and blissfully inattentive to all the bustle and noise surrounding him – and is then abruptly brought back down to earth when he enters the office and finds it in an even greater state of chaotic disarray than usual. In fact the commotion seems to be reaching such a pitch that he initially assumes there's been another Ripper murder and feels a churning sense of unease that doesn't abate until he sees Zeller, who is able to confirm that there hasn't.

"So what *is* going on?" asks Will, perplexed.

Zeller opens his mouth to reply, only to be pre-empted by Jack's head belligerently poking out from behind his office door. "Ah, Mr Graham," it booms. "Good to see you."

"Sir."

"Are you feeling all right? You look a little peaky."

"Thank you, I'm fine."

"Here for the meeting?" Jack's head is still suspended mid-air while his body is behind the door and the sight is so surreal that Will has to fight an urge to laugh before acknowledging that this is indeed the case.

"Well, I've had to push it back to this afternoon," says Jack irritably, "so I'm afraid you've had a wasted journey."

Will, wistfully aware of the infinitely better ways in which he could have spent the morning, opens his mouth to say 'Oh balls,' and then has to hastily convert it into "Oh bother," as a last minute save.

"There's been an almighty disturbance in Fleet Street," continues Jack. "I don't suppose that'll mean anything to you, not being a Londoner, but it's an exclusive district and not at all likely to be the site of violent crime. So a number of our officers have been drafted over and I'm reluctant to start the Ripper meeting without them."

"What sort of disturbance?" asks Will, quickly sobering up because something relatively serious must have happened to arouse such a frenetic reaction.

"I don't know yet," snaps Jack, whose expression clearly indicates how displeased he is about this. "Some local constable came charging in about an hour ago, half hysterical and begging for a CID man to come with him to Fleet Street. Then 30 minutes later *another* constable turns up – *also* hysterical – and requests reinforcements." Jack raises his voice accusingly as Inspector Brent walks past. "Of course it didn't occur to anyone to take the trouble of informing me about any of this."

"We wanted to sir," replies Inspector Brent in a wounded tone. "But you'd left explicit instructions not to be disturbed while the Chief Superintendent was in your office."

“And would it have overly taxed your initiative, Inspector, to suppose that in certain circumstances it might be a good idea to disregard that instruction? If Jack the Ripper walked in, for example? Or London Bridge fell down? Or a member of Her Majesty’s constabulary came staggering into Scotland Yard half crazed with fear claiming he’s just seen the devil in the middle of Westminster?”

“Actually he didn’t say that sir, what he *actually* said…”

“So what’s happened?” interjects Will, who’s growing increasingly irritated with this pointless exchange. “What do we actually *know*?”

“Nothing much as yet Mr Graham,” replies Inspector Brent. “Only that there’s been a terrible murder. A male victim though; not the Ripper’s work.”

“And meaning that until Inspector Humphrey and Inspector Read return we can’t get on with our own business,” adds Jack waspishly. “And it means that Mr Graham here has had a wasted journey. Doesn't it Inspector Brent? Mr Graham, who has come all the way from the *United States of America* to lend his expertise.”

Will, realising that Jack is now in the process of turning him into a stick with which to beat the hapless Inspector Brent, interrupts to point out that this is not a problem.

“Of course it is,” says Jack, who’s now glowering so hard he looks fit to spontaneously combust.

“It’s really not.”

“On the contrary: it is, Mr Graham, because I am announcing it to be so.”

“But who came from America, Mr Crawford, in the first place?”

Jack’s eyebrows elevate halfway up his forehead in surprise. “What’s got into *you*?” he says accusingly.

The new medical consultant as it happens, thinks Will with a smirk. *Quite literally*. Out loud he says: “I apologise. Sir. But it really isn’t a problem. I’ll just…I don’t know. Maybe go for a walk.”

“Yes, you could probably do with some fresh air,” replies Jack in a pointed way. “You look pretty dreadful Mr Graham, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Will wonders, rather idly, how Jack would react if he told him that actually, yes, he does mind – and that furthermore Jack’s in no position to lecture anyone else about their looks while his head’s floating round the side of the door like a fucking gnome on a fairground target practice stall. But in the end he just clears his throat instead, then politely asks what time this afternoon’s meeting is likely to begin.

“Be back by two o’clock,” says Jack, “although admittedly that might be wishful thinking on my part. Do you know if Dr Lecter’s planning to join us?”

“No,” replies Will, forcing himself to Jack directly in the eye. “I haven’t discussed it with him.”

“Well I suppose he still has his medical practice to attend to,” says Jack, trying to sound reasonable despite the rather grudging tone of voice. “But make sure you’re here yourself, I want to fill you in about last night’s surveillance. Although the brief version is that Dr Price was right – we’re going to need you to go down to Whitechapel in person.”

“With respect sir, I said that myself at the time.”

Jack waves this away with an impatient flick of the hand. “Still willing?”

“Of course.”

“Good for you,” replies Jack approvingly. “And speaking of which – hold on a moment.” His head finally disappears from round the door and then reappears a few moments later closely followed, on this occasion, by the rest of his body. “Here,” he says, handing Will a leather box which opens to reveal a black and gold revolver with a long slim barrel. “As promised. Do you know how to use it?”

Will picks up the gun and inspects it, then nods. “Yes, it’s a Colt 45 isn’t it? They’re actually American; we had the same model issued in Baltimore.”

“The cylinder takes six cartridges, which you’ll find in the case.” Jack pauses and looks solemn. “It goes without saying that I hope you won’t need it, but…”

“…But better to be safe than sorry. And I agree.”

Jack nods briskly and then makes as if he’s about to go back inside before hesitating at the last moment and turning round again. “You watch yourself, won’t you?” he says seriously.

“Always have,” Will replies, with a lightness he doesn’t really feel.

“That letter you were sent. ‘*From Hell’*…You know the more I see of this case the more I’m inclined to agree. And I’m not even a religious person.” He wavers once more as if he wants to elaborate, then seems to change his mind and gives a heavy sigh instead; patting Will on the shoulder before adding: “Never let your guard down.”

Will nods in response, trying to appear calm and unconcerned, yet secretly unsettled by this unexpected similarity to Hannibal’s words less than 24 hours ago: “*I made you believe the threat had passed when it was actually at its greatest pitch. Never let your guard down Will*.” Then in spite of himself he feels a fresh shiver of foreboding and has to forcibly push it away. There’s no sensible reason to take it seriously after all. It’s just a coincidence: nothing more than that. A chance replication of the same figure of speech. The same cliché. It’s not like it really *means* anything…not really.

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Will remains in the office for another half hour but ultimately starts to find it oppressive owing to the way Jack’s head seems to reappear round the door to beam rays of disapproval

at Inspector Brent each time Will sighs or shuffles or otherwise gives any indication of boredom or tiredness. At which point Inspector Brent's remorseful bearded face emits a heavy, guilty sigh of its own: and between Jack's head and Inspector Brent's guilt, Will starts to suspect that remaining at his desk may prove more than mortal stamina can bear. So he pulls on his coat and then, at the sight of Jack's head beginning to reappear once more, proceeds to practically sprint out the office before it can resume battering Inspector Brent with any further variations of the 'all the way from *America*,' speech.

"Be here by two o'clock!" bellows Jack's head at Will's departing back; so Will confirms that he intends to be and then runs down the front steps two at a time and ventures off to lose himself amongst the London crowds. It's cold and crisp outside – the kind of weather he's noticed British people sometimes refer to as 'bracing' – but still bearable owing to the snug insulation of the new coat and he decides to stay outdoors a while longer to see if the fresh air can help wake him up. A nearby vendor is crouched over a brazier roasting chestnuts, so Will buys a bag and then wanders into Trafalgar Square to join a group who are clustered round Nelson's Column for the purpose of watching a troupe of jugglers. There's something rather comforting about the aimless, harmless anonymity of it – lost amidst a crowd of tourists, most of whom have their own paper bags of chestnuts, while calling out encouragement to gaudily dressed street performers – and Will can feel himself starting to unwind once more until he happens to catch sight of a young women at the front of the crowd, arm in arm with a tall man in a long grey coat. A more harmless looking person would be impossible to devise, and she's not doing anything of note beyond smiling and laughing at the capering jugglers; but Will still briefly goes pale at the sight of her because her smooth dark hair and pretty face are so similar to Alana's that for a moment he genuinely thinks it might be her. On realising his mistake he isn't initially sure whether he's more relieved or disappointed, but the shock of supposed recognition is nevertheless strong enough to dissolve his previous relaxation and replace it with a sense of guilty anxiety instead. In this respect he's been unhappily aware for some time that he needs to do something about that particular loose end, and as much as he tries to push it away it hovers in his mind nearly constantly: grating and chafing like something trapped in the teeth. Which is probably as it should be, because there's no doubt he's been avoiding it for *far* too long; and both Alana and Margot deserve better.

The idea that the young woman might have been Alana now serves to refuel Will's sense of purpose to face up to his responsibilities where she and Margot are concerned so he forces himself to turn away from the crowd and begin to walk back towards Charing Cross: frowning the entire time over how best to proceed. Contact obviously needs to be initiated somehow and yet the idea of just pitching up without any notice feels rather daunting – not to mention the fact that they might be unsettled to have the subject of *Setting a Monster to Catch a Monster* appearing on their doorstep unsolicited. A letter, then, would be a better place to start…although even that isn't entirely satisfactory because he suspects that it's not really enough on its own, especially after so long a silence. And there's the additional consideration that if they don't want anything else to do with him then he'd still like to give some token of appreciation for their numerous kindnesses that extend beyond a mere letter; which means a gift of some kind should probably be sent as well.

While it's a solution of sorts, this realisation still creates a whole new dilemma because Will realises that he hasn't the faintest idea of the kind of thing that would be acceptable. He now scrolls through his assorted acquaintances for a likely source of advice; although is ultimately

forced to concede that not only are they all male, but all seem deeply unlikely to have any better grasp of female sensibilities than he does himself. Of course an obvious exception to this is Hannibal, who's sufficiently urbane and socially sophisticated to be able to recommend something suitable, but the idea of asking him is far too awkward. After some deliberation, a bit more frowning, and then a good measure of writhing embarrassment, Will finally goes to the Westminster library and consults *Debrett's Guide to Etiquette*: where, after sifting through the most appalling litany of pompous shit and discovering that "Gentlemen are instructed to sit with their backs to the horses in a carriage ride" and that "A gentleman should always remove his hat when entering a room even if the room is empty" (and emitted a series of loud derisive snorts, and been glared at by the librarian, and reciprocated the glare with even greater enthusiasm) it finally transpires that "a modest piece of jewellery is an acceptable token of esteem with which a gentleman may present an unmarried lady of his acquaintance." *Oh God, whatever*, thinks Will with irritation. Nevertheless as solutions go this feels rather promising, as he can recall that Alana had something of a fondness for cameo brooches, with Margot occasionally wearing something similar, and therefore resolves to purchase a matching pair to be sent to the house by courier accompanied by a suitably humble note. There's still time to accomplish both these things before returning for the meeting, so Will heroically resists the temptation to drop-kick *Debrett's Guide to Etiquette* across the reading room (preferably into the face of the disapproving librarian, and for most enjoyable results while wearing a hat) and strikes off again in the general direction of Scotland Yard.

Will locates a small jewellers shop with relative ease: close to Charing Cross and looking as if it might sell the right type of pieces in that it's not so exclusive as to be beyond his financial means, but not so run-down as to only offer merchandise that's either badly-made, poorly-designed, or blatantly stolen and fenced. The shop interior is snug and warm and, despite it being daytime, is illuminated by numerous candles whose flickering light catches the trays of gold rings and spools of diamond necklaces in a way that makes the whole room glitter and sparkle like a modern day Aladdin's cave. The jeweller himself, a whiskery elderly man with gnarled arthritic hands and blinking eyes like a mole, greets Will very kindly and proceeds to contradict all his existing expectations of London shopkeepers by proving to be both knowledgeable and helpful, but not overly forceful in the desire to make a sale. Under his advice Will is able to select two beautifully carved shell cameo brooches – rich russet brown for Margot and a striking blue for Alana – and is waiting for them to be wrapped up (and congratulating himself for a Job Well Done) when the jeweller glances up and sees Will's tie pin for the first time. Upon which he makes a small gasping noise and proceeds, to Will's considerable embarrassment, to plunge into extended and extravagant ecstasies over it.

"Oh, marvellous," he says happily. "Just marvellous. May I?" Without waiting for an answer he raises his hand and runs a reverent finger over the edge. "From the Regency era – a very unusual piece. No, no, actually it's most likely older. Georgian I should say. Such a treat for me see one close up young sir, I haven't come across something like this for *quite* some time."

"No?"

"Oh dear me no, not at all. Not even a modern equivalent. Nowadays people always want Regard Rings as opposed to any other type of jewellery."

“A what?” asks Will, nonplussed.

“A Regard Ring,” repeats the jeweller; and then, having remembered Will’s accent, “perhaps they’re not as popular in America.” He says this in an excessively sympathetic tone, then pats Will’s arm as if being American must be a terrible trial and Will is to be admired for managing to bear it.

“What’s a Regard Ring?” asks Will with excessive patience.

“Well, I’m not sure what it’s like in *America*,” replies the jeweller, lowering his voice in a sepulchral way as if to imply that Will has shown epic levels of resilience for not simply flinging himself off Tower Bridge in despair at not being English. “But here it’s simply not done to show affection to one’s sweetheart in public. As a result there’s a tendency to exchange one’s pledge in concealed ways, and that’s were Regard Rings come in. They’re a form of…well, subterfuge I suppose one might call it; a way to send a hidden message. The names of the jewels form an acrostic, so a classic Regard Ring would be made from a ruby, emerald, garnet, amethyst, ruby, diamond, and sapphire. Do you see? It spells out *Regard*. *Dearest*, that’s another one: diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, emerald, sapphire and topaz.” The jeweller pauses and sighs sentimentally. “It’s a type of love letter, made entirely of gemstones.”

“O-h-h-h,” says Will.

“Of course this isn’t a ring,” adds the jeweller patiently, as if he’s forgotten that Will has most likely worked this out for himself beforehand. “And it’s been customised; the original stones have been removed and replaced with new ones. Quite recently too, judging from the quality. That’s not the type of thing a young lady would do – far too scandalous. This must have been a gift for someone’s husband.”

“I had *no idea*,” replies Will, before adding, more casually: “Do you recognise the stones in this? I, um, bought it in a shop on Oxford Street. I didn’t know that it might mean anything.”

“Oh certainly,” says the jeweller, clearly delighted to have an opportunity to handle it. He neatly slots a loupe in front of his right eye and then squints beneath the light of a nearby candelabra, turning the tie pin from one way to the other. “Let me see. Well, I’m fairly certain this is a beryl. An emerald here, of course; rather a fine one too. That’s the famous blue lapis lazuli, and this lovely speckled one is opal. Then vermarine here, another emerald after it, and a diamond to finish. *Beloved.”*

Will blinks a few times, opens his mouth, closes it again, and then without fully intending to hears himself asking: “Could you make a customised one yourself?”

“I could! Very happily. Do you have something particular in mind? If not I have a catalogue here so you can choose which stones you’d like – both precious and semi-precious fully available. I might have to order them in I’m afraid, but it would only take a week or so.”

Upon coming so close to committing himself Will suddenly falters again: torn between an irresistible desire to throw caution to the wind and plunge ahead on the impulse of the moment, and the nagging doubts about the potential pitfalls of such a madcap scheme. It’s

actually pretty impossible to imagine presenting Hannibal with a jewelled Regard Ring, no matter how subtly and artfully made; but likewise there's no way he can request an ostensibly masculine trinket without the jeweller delivering the finished piece along with a policeman. And then there's also the cost which, when combined with the brooches – and even in a modest shop like this – is going to be prohibitive. All of last month's salary and much of this month's and the next; and which in turn was supposed to go towards saving enough money for a ticket back to America. But even as he's hesitating, trying to be rational and sensible, he knows deep down that the imposed restraint is a waste of time because he's going to do it anyway.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to pay for it in full until next month," says Will firmly. "But could you take a deposit now and I'll give you the rest when I come back to collect it?"

"Not a problem at all young sir," replies the jeweller. He smiles warmly at Will and then rummages in a drawer to retrieve a typed index of gemstones which he proceeds to spread across the counter with a professional flourish: pointing out certain entries with his gnarled fingers and making particular recommendations in a kindly and well-meaning way; even though it's entirely unnecessary because Will already knows what to choose…has known for quite some time. And so, oblivious to the other customers in the shop and even the gently smiling gaze of the jeweller, Will tenderly runs his finger down the list as if stroking the paper and very clearly and very carefully, so that there can be no possible mistake, indicates his selection one by one: lapis lazuli, opal, vermarine – and an emerald to finish.

Chapter End Notes

"He has a rare quality about him which makes one want to endeavour on his behalf in an attempt to earn his notice and recognition." To cannibalinthetardis, who noted that S3 was "the most extreme example of gay pining and desperate attention seeking ever seen in a TV show", this line is respectfully dedicated ;-D

Also….CHRISTMAS IS COMING!!

SANTA: What do you want for Christmas this year young lady?

ME: A fourth series of Hannibal please Santa.

SANTA: [*Wipes away tears with his beard*] Ahhh, everyone wants that my dear.

ME: And a Hannigram kiss. A proper one. Not a half-assed attempt in front of a blue screen that even got cut from the special edition DVD.

SANTA: [*Sobbing freely*] I'd give all my elves to Bryan Fuller in return for a proper Hannigram kiss. And the reindeer. And then Mrs Santa too.

ME: A proper one, goddammit Santa. WITH TONGUES.

SANTA: [*Now hysterical with grief*] Tongues!

Santa and I go to the pub to drown our sorrows. Later on a punch-up is had with the locals who insist that Anthony Hopkins' portrayal is the definitive one. The police are sent for. Arrests are made. Santa and I go down with our ship and have a drunken yet sentimental rendition of 'Love Crime' in the back of the police car.

This is totally going to happen.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Happy nearly-new year Fannibals! Woo! And if you celebrate Christmas I hope you had a lovely, lovely weekend :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On leaving the jeweller's shop Will calls in at a courier service to arrange having the brooches despatched to Alana's house, accompanied by a carefully worded note in his best handwriting explaining their purchase and expressing a wish to pay a call at some point if acceptable. Then he pays the money and writes down the address, and from there continues onwards to Scotland Yard: bright-eyed and smiling while occasionally raising his hand to his neck to brush against the contours of the tie pin – and altogether suffused with an expansive surge of happiness that's so precious and singular it feels as if he should be cupping it protectively with his hands and holding it close to his chest whilst simultaneously wishing to revel in it for the rare and joyful thing it is before proclaiming it to the world. After a while the sensation begins to grow uncontainable, and Will finally abandons restraint and runs down the length of Charing Cross simply for the satisfaction of feeling free and uninhibited with the wind in his face and the pavement flying past beneath his feet. He's aware of people staring at him in astonishment at such a flagrant breach of decorum – even the occasional disapproving "Oh my!" – but disregards it all and continues to run. 'I don't care if you don't approve of me,' he wants to yell at them. 'I don't care, I don't *care.*'

Before he gets to Whitehall Place Will forces himself to stop and sober up in anticipation of facing Jack Crawford – who will almost certainly *not* be sympathetic to impromptu displays of romantic devotion – and removes the rather dreamy smile from his face in order to replace it with a suitably solemn 'I come to kick ass in the name of Queen Victoria' expression. Then he attempts to jostle his way into the Scotland Yard entrance which, rather unusually, is choked up with pedestrians. On further inspection these turn out to be a group of monstrously over-privileged schoolchildren – all done up in tiny identikit suits and ties – that are being overseen by a rather harassed looking schoolmaster who's busily engaged with describing the intricacies of the British justice system. Will attempts to sidle past and is promptly waylaid by the latter, who's obviously sick to death of lecturing his small obnoxious charges and is hoping to be temporarily relieved by an actual police officer; and which, taken together, suggests to Will that his 'I come to kick ass' expression has been a little bit too successful.

"If you'd perhaps be willing to tell them about your role?" says the schoolmaster beseechingly. Beneath his spectacles he blinks at Will with large imploring eyes like a puppy. "It would be awfully thrilling for them."

"*Awfully* thrilling," confirms one of the children with a slight sneer. He has a cut-glass accent and a pale imperious face; and the tone of his remark, if fed through a translator, would

almost certainly come out as ‘So entertain us immediately, you utter peasant.’

“I’m sorry,” says Will, who clearly isn’t, “but I have a meeting to attend.”

“Just five minutes?” asks the schoolmaster, growing perilously close to begging. The tone of *his* remark, if fed through the same translator, would imply: ‘In the name of all that’s merciful, give me some respite from these little monsters.’

“It's not a good time,” replies Will firmly.

“But surely just *five* minutes?”

“I’m afraid it’s simply not possible…”

“Sir! Sir! That man’s American!” shriek several of The Monsters, tugging at Will’s sleeve.

“Yes that’s right boys, very good, the gentleman is American.”

“Piss off you little bastards,” mutters Will under his breath.

“Johnson!” says the schoolmaster, clearly determined to turn this revelation to some educational purpose. “What year did America sever her political connections to Great Britain?”

“Sir, I don't know sir,” replies Johnson earnestly. Will – who can never remember either – exchanges a commiserating look with him.

“Roberts?”

“The second of August 1776 sir; The Declaration of Independence sir. Signed into law by the Founding Fathers on the fourth of July sir.”

“Excellent, Roberts.”

“Illegally sir! My papa says the Founding Fathers ought to have been boiled in oil, sir.”

“Sir, *my* papa says that George Washington was full of…”

“All right boys that’s enough.”

“Sir! Sir!” chorus The Monsters in unison. ”Why is an American person allowed to work in Scotland Yard?”

Will’s patience has now expired to the extent he's on the verge of swinging round and loudly announcing ‘I’ll tell you why – it’s because your own police force is *shit*,’ when an unlikely source of deliverance emerges in the form of Jack Crawford, striding round the corner with his usual indomitable style and scattering Monsters right and left as he ploughs straight through the centre of them. He’s clutching a paper bag in one hand that Will assumes to contain his lunch, is wearing a far more impressive variant of the ‘I come to kick ass’

expression, and is additionally resplendent in a stiff-brimmed homburg hat of such excessive and unrepentant hairiness that Will is temporarily struck dumb by the sight of it.

“Mr Graham!” booms Jack. “Nice and punctual for once; first time for everything isn't there son? Well come along – don’t just stand there staring, what are you waiting for?”

Will is secretly hoping that one of The Monsters might help explain his temporary paralysis with a loud enquiry along the lines of “Sir! Sir! Why does that man have a dead and decomposing ferret on his head?” although of course they don’t. The reaction of the schoolmaster, on the other hand, is striking. Whereas his previous manner towards Will was politely imploring – almost deferential – he’s now taken an extremely obvious step backwards at the sound of Jack’s words, eyes darting fearfully and hands fluttering around his throat like frail white scarves. In fact the change is so pronounced that Will is briefly mystified before he takes a closer look at the man’s face and intuits that – of course – he’s recognised the name and belatedly identified himself as talking to the notorious Will Graham from the pages of *The Tattle Crime*. The schoolmaster now briefly catches Will’s eye as if to confirm the suspicion, then clears his throat with a nervous scraping sound before adding in a thin reedy voice: “Well, come along now boys, let’s not distract these gentlemen any longer.”

“What on earth was all that about?” asks Jack as The Monsters, grumbling mutinously, are chivvied away from the building.

“I’ve no idea,” replies Will; aware, even as he’s lying about it, of the liberating sense that he doesn’t really doesn’t care. It’s actually quite remarkable. Not long ago at all a scene like that – and what it represented – would have been devastating. Now the layers of disapproval and rejection are so much easier to disregard: merely something extraneous to be brushed off, like lint from a coat collar or dirt on one’s shoe. Something that doesn’t belong to him. “Let’s go inside then shall we sir,” he adds out loud. In front of him he can still see the schoolmaster darting the occasional scandalised glance from the other side of the street, and he meets the man’s eye one final time before slowly and deliberately turning away.

On entering the building it transpires that Inspectors Humphrey and Read have still not returned from Fleet Street; and Jack, after practically frothing at the mouth with irritation, finally concedes defeat and agrees to start the meeting without them. “Everyone into the board room,” he says now, clapping his hands together in an imperious way. “Dr Price, leave that report you can finish it later. Mr Zeller – you too, this very minute. And for God’s sakes someone speak to the porter and have the fire built up in the board room. The temperature is appalling; it’s practically minus five in there.”

“I wish we were minus him,” mutters Price in an undertone to Will as Dr Chilton saunters past. “It’s hardly necessary to have him at every single meeting.” Dr Chilton, somewhat red and flushed from too much wine at lunchtime, now comes to a halt nearby and proceeds to make a bizarrely ostentatious performance of removing his expensive overcoat, lingering over each button and occasionally pausing to smooth down the fabric of the lapels. There’s actually something vaguely lascivious in the way he does it, to the extent that Will starts to feel as if they should be apologising for catching him in the middle of an intimate act that’s best performed in private.

“Good lord,” says Price faintly as Dr Chilton frees himself from the right sleeve with a suggestive little wriggle. “The man’s an *epic* idiot.”

The overcoat has now been fully removed and tossed aside and Dr Chilton stretches luxuriously as if inviting everyone present to feast their eyes on the spectacle of his impeccably cut suit, accessorised with a cravat of a rather alarming shade of scarlet.

“So clever of him to match it to his face,” adds Price bitchily.

“What’s that?” calls Dr Chilton in a jovial voice.

“Just admiring the colour of your cravat Frederick.”

“Yes it is rather fine isn’t it,” agrees Dr Chilton giving it a little self-satisfied tug. “Mulberry silk; my tailor orders it in especially.” No one seems to have any sensible response to make to this, so Dr Chilton tenderly strokes the cravat as if commiserating with it for having to tolerate such plebeian company before pausing and running his eyes over Will. “Not wearing your glasses today Mr Graham?” he says in a rather accusing way.

Will raises his eyebrows in a ‘well – obviously’ gesture.

“And your clothes look different. A bit more…” Dr Chilton hesitates slightly, obviously deeply reluctant to use a word like *stylish* or *sophisticated*. “A bit more…tailored.”

“Are they?” says Will in a bored voice.

“Your hair as well,” persists Dr Chilton, undeterred.

“I thought I needed a change.”

Dr Chilton puts his head on one side and then gives one of his little laughs. “Well as long as *you* like it Mr Graham, that’s the main thing. Now where on earth has Mr Crawford got to? Oh, there you are Jack. Let’s proceed now, shall we? Some of us have busy schedules to attend to.”

“I’m well aware of that,” replies Jack waspishly. “But as I’m sure you all know by now there’s been a serious disturbance in Westminster and it’s consuming quite a few of our resources. I expect a full report to be forthcoming when our Inspectors get back. Although God knows when *that’s* going to be. I can’t think what’s taking them so long.”

“So in the meantime…?” asks Dr Chilton with a patronising wave of the hand.

“In the meantime we stick to our agenda as best we can. You all have copies?”

Will, who doesn’t, but isn’t particularly keen to obtain one, gives a small sigh and then leans back in his chair and fights to stop his attention wandering too much back to Harley Street. Exhaustion is beginning to pincer at his head like a vice and it’s an enormous effort not to simply close his eyes and retreat into the security and privacy of his own internal space. The window opposite is streaming with condensation and he now fixes on a particularly large drop that’s running parallel to another one as if the two of them are engaged in a race. Will

stares at it for a while, silently urging it on, hazily wondering what on earth's the matter with him. He's so detached from all this; present yet absent. It's strange. He just doesn't…care. The bead of condensation now gives a tremulous little quiver and defeatedly allows itself to be absorbed into the surrounding droplets. Will sighs again and refocuses his attention on the conversation.

"…And so here is the design for the new letterhead," Jack is saying, his voice droning like a fog horn. "From now on all official correspondence should be done using this. And a very nice design it is too, as I'm sure you'll all agree." He picks up a copy of the image – a rather clichéd confection involving a lion interspersed with assorted crests and sidgels – and brandishes it accusingly, as if daring anyone to disagree.

"Ah, the British lion," says Dr Chilton with a sentimental coo. "And what a marvellous mascot it is. Such stirring associations: pride, courage, tenacity. So much more rousing than other countries one might care to mention. The French rooster, for example." He pauses for a few seconds before adding maliciously: "Or the American bald eagle."

Everyone now glances nervously at Will as if anticipating a passionate patriotic tantrum in response to having his country's national animal deemed marginally less rousing than a Gallic rooster. Will, in turn, supposes that he really ought to be drawing his sword on behalf of America's bald eagles but can't actually be bothered, so just gives a rather aimless 'yeah, what I can say – fuck bald eagles' shrug and resumes doodling on the back of his notepad.

"Oh look, it's snowing," says Sergeant Matthews, distracting everyone even further.

"And for *another* thing…" adds Jack, although at this point he loses his audience because the door has opened and Hannibal walks in: pale and hollow-eyed and somewhat the worse for wear from too much sex and not enough sleep; and yet, being Hannibal, still managing to radiate sufficient poise and self-possession to make everyone else look like peasants in comparison. Several of the younger police officers promptly leap to their feet and nearly crash into each other in their haste to offer him their chairs.

"Ah, Dr Lecter," says Price good-naturedly. "You're very welcome."

"Just so – this *is* an unexpected pleasure," adds Jack, breaking his current non-smiling record of seven hours and forty six minutes. "Take this seat by the fire. Can I have anything brought for you?"

Dr Chilton, who's already simmering with annoyance at this obvious admiration, slowly begins to bristle like a malevolent hedgehog at having to watch so much attention being lavished on someone else; and when one of the young officers announces what a pleasure it is to meet Hannibal at last, having heard so much about him, Dr Chilton can't contain himself any longer and announces loudly: "Somewhat dissipated Dr Lecter, if you don't mind me saying so. I do hope you're not coming down with anything?" He smiles with false concern before gesturing at Will, obviously feeling that he's diminishing Hannibal's status by linking them together. "In fact there's not much to distinguish you from Mr Graham; you look almost as worn-out as one another. What have you both been doing?"

“What have *you* been doing Mr Graham?” asks Hannibal opening his eyes very wide. He’s gratified to see Will go faintly pink around the cheekbones before shooting Hannibal an exasperated look.

“Nothing much,” says Will firmly.

“Well *I* have been studying,” replies Hannibal in an excessively virtuous voice. “Studying extraordinarily…hard. And virtually all night long. *Human anatomy*,” he adds, rather complacently. “I am afraid I am something of a slave to my profession.”

“Well that’s extremely commendable, I must say,” observes Price. “I ought to be similarly conscientious, but I’m afraid I’ve pretty much given up on that type of thing since my student days.”

“Dr Lecter is a perfect *paragon* of dedication,” says Jack admiringly. So Hannibal leans back in his seat and politely and modestly receives everyone’s congratulations for being a tireless slave to the medical profession while darting the occasional triumphant look at Will, who seems ready to spontaneously combust – although admittedly nowhere near as much as Dr Chilton, who’s privately forced to admit he’s badly miscalculated in mentioning Hannibal’s tiredness as it’s merely been a means of amplifying the already infuriating levels of admiration. He’s also, in turn, completely oblivious to the fact that Hannibal has deliberately manoeuvred the exchange to this precise purpose: because apart from how delectable Will looks when blushing, driving Dr Chilton insane with irritated envy is a source of endless entertainment. Hannibal now catches Will’s eye and gives the very faintest flicker of a smile.

I love you madly, thinks Will wryly, *even though you are a complete bastard*.

“Yes, that is quite correct,” adds Hannibal airily to Inspector Brent. “*All* night long.”

“Gray’s, I suppose?” asks Price. “The original and still the best. In fact I probably need to review the chapters on the circulatory system myself.”

“Indeed. I was in and out several times,” says Hannibal, at which point Will chokes on his glass of water.

“My word, were you really?” asks Price in an admiring tone.

Will, who’s now genuinely terrified that Hannibal is going to begin waxing lyrical about his extensive study of the male reproductive system (all night long), loudly clears his throat and interrupts to ask Jack about the results of last night’s surveillance in Whitechapel. Hannibal smiles serenely; Will catches his eye and blushes again. “More difficult than expected,” says Jack. “Although on one hand it’s rather tantalizing. There’s a sense that this really might be an opportunity to get him, if only we can refine our strategy somewhat.”

“What Mr Crawford means,” amends Price, “is that while in theory the plan has real potential, in practice we weren’t as successful at blending in as we hoped we’d be.”

“Not entirely,” admits Jack.

“Not at all,” says Price. “Not *remotely*. We need to put far more thought and effort into it.”

“What a shame we can’t have female officers,” adds Sergeant Matthews in a rather pitiful tone. “It would be a perfect ruse. They could try and lure the Ripper and then commandeer him.”

“Female officers!” splutters Jack.

Will and Zeller, who are now in poorly concealed hysterics, emit small sighs and then fix their eyes to the desktop. Dr Chilton, meanwhile, has hysterics of a different kind upon discovering that Jack is completely immovable on the subject of him joining them on subsequent nights.

“But *why*?” says Dr Chilton stubbornly. “I must say Mr Crawford, you’re being very high-handed about this.”

“Yes Mr Crawford,” adds Hannibal, so smooth he could slide uphill. “Why *is* that?”

“Because we can’t guarantee your safety,” replies Jack bluntly. “And unlike this lot,” he adds, gesturing at the assorted policemen, “you’re not a member of the Metropolitan Constabulary.”

“Neither is Mr Graham,” says Dr Chilton, practically bouncing up and down in his seat.

“*Inspector* Graham has an honorary contract,” replies Jack through gritted teeth, having conveniently forgotten that no one else ever uses Will’s proper title either. “And is additionally an experienced law enforcement officer.”

“So why can Dr Price and Mr Zeller go?” demands Dr Chilton in a shrill voice. “They’re based at St Bartholomew’s.”

“Because Dr Price has a portion of his salary paid by Scotland Yard as our Police Surgeon.”

“And so Mr Zeller comes too as a kind of job-lot,” says Price helpfully. “Two for the price of one – as it were.”

“Precisely.” Jack raises a hand to stem the flow of objection that Dr Chilton is clearly gearing up to make. “And yes, Frederick, I appreciate that you hold a similar position but it’s in a consultative capacity. We don’t formally employ you, and therefore we don’t have insurance for you; and therefore neither yourself nor Dr Lecter are going to be allowed to come and put yourselves at risk in the middle of Whitechapel and leave Scotland Yard open to a negligence suit should anything go wrong.”

“Yes, but…”

“*Dr Chilton*,” snaps Jack. “I’ve made myself clear. I consider this an end to the matter.”

Hannibal raises a fastidious eyebrow at this outburst and then exchanges a long, slow glance with Dr Chilton; who in turn arranges his face into a petulant ‘that’s what you think’ expression.

“Anyway, as I was *saying*,” growls Jack with a pointed look at Dr Chilton. “In response to our previous discussion: to be perfectly honest the surveillance was something of an anti-climax.”

“Assuredly so,” adds Price. “There we all were, anticipating cataclysmic occurrences and men bearing down on us with knives and kidneys and in the end nothing happened at all. Well – at least nothing of *that* nature,” he adds with a frown. “But as to the level of poverty and deprivation. *Well*. I mean of course one reads about it in the papers, but to really see it close…”

“Yes, yes,” says Jack, impatient with what he sees as an irrelevant bit of introspection.

“And the fear is palpable,” adds Inspector Brent. “You can smell it in the air.”

“Thank you for that poetic insight Inspector,” snaps Jack, even more impatient with waxing lyrical about the blatantly obvious. “Of course the community is terrified. But as Dr Price says there were no assaults and no indication of any.” He pauses and then begins to drum his fingers on the table top. “Nevertheless something wasn’t entirely right; there’s no doubt that at times several of us felt we were being watched.”

Inspector Turner waves his hands in vigorous agreement at this. “We were,” he says, “I’m *certain* of it. Of course that’s not to say we were being watched by…by *him*. Anyone might have noticed us as strange faces in the area. In fact we may have simply been an object of suspicion ourselves, but…”

“But you had a bad feeling about it?” suggests Will.

Inspector Turner nods gratefully. “Yes. Yes exactly – a bad feeling.”

“Did anyone approach you?”

“Several times. A few women but mostly men.”

“And?”

“And nothing. It was always along the lines of ‘I haven’t seen *you* round these parts before.’”

“Hence the need for your input Mr Graham,” interrupts Jack. “As first proposed by yourself and Dr Price – and contrary to my better judgement – I have to agree that your presence there may well be a catalyst for drawing him out. But not tonight,” he adds sharply. “You look dead on your feet and you need to have every single one of your wits about you before you set foot within a hundred paces of Whitechapel.”

Will nods wearily, unable to argue with the logic of this, and Price gives him a kindly pat on the arm. “It’s probably better to wait a little longer anyway,” he says. “We had a chance to establish a perimeter last night but we’ll need a little longer to get a thorough sense of the locale. And I personally wouldn’t be happy having you there until the rest of us gain a proper mastery of the environment.”

“Agreed,” says Jack solemnly. “If anything goes wrong…” he gives a somewhat loaded pause, silently intimating what all those possible things could be “…then every single officer needs to be at the top of his game and in complete control of the surroundings.”

“It’s a sinister place,” adds Zeller gloomily. “All fog and narrow alleyways. And personally I agree: we were *definitely* being watched.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense about swirling fog and being watched by sinister strangers,” snaps Jack, somewhat unreasonably considering he was the one to bring it up in the first place. “This operation requires a hard head, not being swayed by over-imagination. In that respect, Mr Zeller, I don’t want another repeat of last night’s performance.”

“We were in a public house,” says Price to Will in explanation. “*The Ten Bells* – awful place – although notable as a favourite watering hole of two of the victims and a likely source of information. Not that we got any; although we might have done, had Mr Zeller not hissed ‘over there!’ and sent us running into the street in pursuit.”

“It wasn’t as dramatic as all that,” says Zeller defensively.

“On the contrary Mr Zeller; Billy the Kid couldn’t have emptied a public house any faster than you did.”

“Yes, all right, but the man looked *odd*. He was just stood there staring – I mean really staring – and he had his cap pulled all the way down in a really bizarre way, like he only had half a face. I mean seriously, you should have seen him. And…”

“And it was a complete wild goose chase,” snaps Jack. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about in terms of not allowing our imaginations to get the better of us. I mean for heaven’s sake Mr Zeller, it’s one of the most unseasonable winters on record. Half of London has its hat pulled down over its face.” He gestures towards the window where, obligingly enough, a delivery boy is scuttling past with a woollen cap tugged over his eyebrows. Jack nods with satisfaction. “No more nonsense about *hats*,” he says firmly.

Despite the undeniable logic of this, Will is still beginning to frown to himself as he tries to unravel the faint twinge of recognition that Zeller’s description has evoked: *a cap pulled all the way down in a really bizarre way*. Surely he’s seen something similar recently…hasn’t he? At the exact same moment Jack straightens the lapels on his jacket and opens his mouth to continue, although for the second time in the meeting he’s destined to lose his audience because the door has just opened once more: this time to admit Inspectors Humphrey and Read.

“Good lord Mr Crawford!” explodes the latter. “You’ve never seen anything like this.” He slumps against the wall, fumbling in his pocket for a handkerchief before scrubbing it over his waxy, perspiring face.

“*Never*,” confirms Inspector Humphrey. “And God willing you never shall.”

There's a startled silence while everyone exchanges uneasy glances in response to such palpable distress and discomfort before Jack leans forward across the desk and says in a low, terse voice: "So what, *exactly*, have I never seen the like of?"

"The victim," replies Inspector Read in a hushed tone. "It…it was…"

"It was *hideous*," continues Inspector Humphrey when it becomes obvious that his colleague is struggling to continue. "Whoever did this is disturbed to an extent I can scarcely credit as possible."

"Let's save those kinds of insights for the doctors shall we Inspector?" snaps Jack. "And focus on what actually happened. Heaven knows we've been waiting all day to hear."

"I'll gladly leave it to the doctors," replies Inspector Humphrey in a voice that for a few seconds sounds close to breaking. "'Disturbed beyond belief' is about as close as I can get to the mind of whoever is responsible for that nightmare in Fleet Street; and it's as far as I would ever want to go."

"It's obviously had a terrible impact on you both," says Will in a gentle tone. "But Mr Crawford really needs to know what you saw." He casts a sharp look at Jack. "If you can just describe it as clearly as possible then you can take the rest of the day off and spend some time at home with your families."

"Yes – yes, naturally," says Jack, trying to suppress his impatience.

Inspector Read blinks foolishly at Will, as if he's temporarily forgotten that such mundane things as homes and families exist and is slightly confused by the reminder of them. Will smiles encouragingly and Inspector Read makes a visible effort to pull himself together before announcing "It was a male victim," in an eerie mechanical tone that's obviously an attempt to distance himself from the horror of what he's seen. "He'd been lashed to a chair in his office. His face was disfigured. Horribly disfigured. His…his lips were gone. It meant we could see the teeth – the whole jaw was exposed." His voice breaks. "And he'd been set on fire sir; burned alive. You could see where the skin had literally melted off the bones…"

He trails off helplessly, knotting his fingers together and seemingly oblivious to the resulting stunned silence – broken only by the young frightened voice of Sergeant Matthews murmuring "Oh my word, oh lord," under his breath – before Hannibal abruptly stands up and offers his own chair to Inspector Humphrey. "Mr Crawford," he says pointedly, "these men are both in shock. Do you have any spirits in the station – brandy, anything like that?"

"In my office," replies Jack hoarsely, sounding rather shocked himself. "Sergeant Matthews, go and fetch it please – top drawer of my desk. And…?" He looks obediently at Hannibal, who's now busy checking Inspector Read's pulse.

"Blankets," says Hannibal crisply. "If you have them? And be so good as to clear a space and give them some air. Now gentlemen," he adds, returning to the two Inspectors, "I know you came back here at a great emotional cost to yourselves because you are committed and conscientious and wish to apprehend whoever is responsible for this. That means there is

certain information which you need to tell us; do you think you are able to do that, or would you prefer to postpone it until later?"

"No, thank you sir but I can do it now," replies Inspector Read, whose colour has returned slightly under the restorative effects of the brandy.

"Very good. So – there are no obvious suspects at the present time, is that correct?"

"None at all," says Inspector Humphrey. With a few prompts from Hannibal and Jack, he manages to provide a brief account of the body's discovery and the assorted witness statements before concluding that "All we really know for sure is that it happened in the middle of the night."

"You have done extremely well," replies Hannibal. "And if you can bear to dwell on it just a little longer, I have two questions of my own."

"Sir?"

"You say that the unfortunate victim had his lips removed?"

"Yes sir."

"Were there any signs of human tissue at the scene? Anything near the body?"

"N-no sir."

"No? So that means the assailant took them with him." There's a horrified silence while everyone absorbs the implications of this before Hannibal adds smoothly: "You told us that the scene was at Fleet Street – are we to suppose, then, that the victim was a journalist?"

"Why yes, sir, yes he was. I'm sorry, I…"

"It is fine; entirely understandable." Hannibal pauses again, almost leisurely, and entirely aware of the way Will to his left has gone rigid and still. "And do you know his name?"

"I'm sorry sir, yes, I ought to have said, I'm sorry…"

"There is no need to apologise," replies Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice. "Can you tell us his name?"

"Lounds sir. Freddy Lounds. Of *The Tattle Crime*."

"Freddy Lounds," repeats Hannibal softly. "Thank you."

A further stricken silence greets this revelation, possibly the longest one yet, before everyone jerks back to life and begins talking at once. Everyone, that is, with the exception of Will: who remains fixed and motionless as he's caught in the rather unsettling sensation of observing his own reaction to the news. It's as if he's watching the part of himself that's experiencing a sense of guilt and shocked responsibility, whilst simultaneously mediating with another aspect that's far more cool and pragmatic and feels no weight of culpability at

all. There's an eerie duality to it: these twin versions of himself that shouldn't feasibly be able to coexist and share the same body and yet are not only achieving it, but excelling at doing so and even deriving a level of satisfaction in the opposition. So eloquent and plausible in their competing principles to the extent there's almost a kind of artistry in it: laureates of a double life. And perhaps more than anything else, he knows without even checking that Hannibal will be looking at him now with an expression that's not one of condemnation, or horror, or shock, but rather of calm cool appraisal. And Will knows that this should bother him – and yet it doesn't.

Meanwhile the meeting is reverberating with Freddy's name, buzzing and thrumming and blurring together in assorted male voices until it starts to sound like some kind of discordant percussion instrument: *Freddy-Freddy-Freddy-Lounds-Lounds-Lounds*. Given the negative influence his reporting has had on the investigation it's by no means the first time he's been mentioned within Scotland Yard, although the name has never before been uttered in the way it is now: with alarm and distress and an unmistakable hint of compassionate sympathy. However there's one notable exception, as Dr Chilton now pronounces it louder than anyone else and in a tone that's shot through with triumph.

"Freddy *Lounds*," he says, rolling the syllables around with relish before casting a long, deliberate look at Will. "Well, Mr Graham, that must be a great weight off *your* mind. They do say, after all, that revenge is a dish best served cold."

As Jack glances up sharply, Will forces himself to snap out of his private reverie and re-focus his attention on Dr Chilton's gloating face. "If that remark is supposed to imply that *I* had something to do with this," he replies in a cold voice, "then you may as well just come out and say so."

"Don't be ridiculous," snaps Jack. "Of course no one thinks that. Freddy Lounds had enemies stretching from here to Westminster pier."

"Oh no *doubt*," hisses Dr Chilton. "Although surely not many of them had recently been exposed as vicious killers? I think Mr Graham might be rather unique on that score."

"For heaven's sake Frederick," says Price with unusual anger. "This is hardly helpful."

Dr Chilton blithely ignores him and turns to Jack. "But surely you're going to be questioning everyone with a known grudge? A known *motive*. After all I see no reason for Mr Graham to be exempt from the same standards as anyone else. Suppose you tell us where you were last night Mr Graham? And don't say you were asleep, because we can all clearly see that you weren't."

Will goes slightly cold at this, because of course his alibi comes at the expense of a two year prison sentence. Potentially even a death sentence: hard labour is notoriously brutal, after all, and it's well known that many people don't survive it. Nevertheless he forces himself to look Dr Chilton in the eye and reply in a level voice: "I was in bed of course. And no, I wasn't asleep. I had a headache."

"Oh yes, your famous headaches," says Dr Chilton with something like a snarl. "We know all about *those*."

“I’m afraid I must agree with Dr Price that this is hardly helpful,” interjects Hannibal, who sounds incredibly calm – almost bored – and yet is privately fascinated by how quickly Dr Chilton (and if the doubting expressions are anything to go by, a number of the others) has assumed Will to be capable of something like this. “Means, motive, and even opportunity are persuasive, but not conducive to guilt by themselves. After all, most of the people round this table have been targeted by Mr Lounds at one point or another.”

“Myself more than anyone else,” adds Jack.

“That’s as may be,” says Dr Chilton venomously, “but nor have you been indicted for a rather gruesome killing.”

“Actually neither have I,” replies Will. “I was cleared on medical grounds and so wasn’t indicted for anything. And the victim in that case was a mass murderer of young woman, not some sort of personal vendetta.” Will pauses then smiles sweetly at Dr Chilton. “If I went round avenging every grudge I’ve ever had I can guarantee I would’ve been picked up long before now.”

“Well I can see no one is going to listen to my warning,” says Dr Chilton, bringing his hands down onto the table with a decided crack. “Not that it would be the first time. And of course the police force *is* notorious for covering up for one another.”

“All right, that’s *enough*,” snaps Jack. “If evidence emerges to implicate Mr Graham – or any other member of Scotland Yard – then that evidence will naturally be investigated with the full force of the law. But being the subject of a vindictive article by Freddy Lounds is not going to be our starting point. If it was then half of London would be a suspect.” He softens his voice slightly and turns to Inspector Read. “What do the eyewitnesses say?”

“Not much sir. A reporter from the building opposite thinks he may have seen a figure entering the premises around 8pm but he can’t swear to the time.” He shrugs a bit helplessly. “Of course it gets dark so early this time of year it’s easy to lose track and assume it’s later than it is. It might just as easily have been a *Tattle Crime* employee that he saw.”

“We’ll keep interviewing,” says Jack. “Start with the staff. Someone may have some information – whether he’d been threatened, received any menacing letters; that sort of thing. And find out if there was anything going on in his personal life.”

“And tell the Editor not to print anything about it for the time being,” adds Will. “We could do without being inundated with sensationalist coverage. Not that I expect him to listen. No doubt *The Tattle Crime* is going to milk this for all it’s worth – they’ll be martyring that complete bastard as the greatest journalist since Nestor the Chronicler.”

“Agreed on all three counts,” says Jack grimly. “All right gentleman, I think the Ripper investigation is going to have to take a backseat for today. Dr Lecter, Dr Chilton – there’s no need for you to remain any longer. I apologise for having wasted your time.”

“Are you *dismissing* us Mr Crawford,” demands Dr Chilton with a significant glance at Hannibal.

“No,” replies Jack, who’s clearly struggling to keep his temper. “I’m merely saying that there’s no need for you to stay.”

“Well I for one must leave,” says Hannibal. “I have an appointment in an hour.” Which leaves Dr Chilton torn between wanting to remain and foil Jack’s supposed exclusion ploy, yet likewise reluctant to give the impression that he has fewer demands on his time than Hannibal does.

“I’ll show you out Dr Lecter,” says Will quickly.

“Thank you Inspector Graham,” replies Hannibal, turning his slow, smooth gaze in Will’s direction. “That is very courteous of you.”

“Although come straight back here,” says Jack bossily. “You’re not excused yourself. I want your input on the Lounds case – no wandering off.”

“Sir,” replies Will mechanically. He pushes back his chair and politely waits for Hannibal to gather up his coat and pay a courteous farewell to the assembled taskforce members, then holds the door open for him and escorts him down the corridor.

“A striking absence of guilt there, Inspector Graham,” says Hannibal in a low tone as they walk across the office. “I must congratulate you.”

“I was waiting for you to mention that.” Will gives a long sideways glance. “Couldn’t even wait until we’d left the building could you? And yes – to borrow your phrase, it looks like I cast my lure correctly after all.”

“Indeed you did,” replies Hannibal. “A true personal touch wasn’t it Will? One might even call it *intimate*. Customized from you to Mr Lounds with planning, forethought and endless tender patience.” Will doesn't reply immediately and Hannibal moves closer so that their fingers briefly brush together. “Such an ironic contrast to the actual culprit isn’t it? For him it was nothing more than a furious inelegant slaughter of someone whose name was unknown to him until he heard it from you. How he lacks your flair.”

“I didn’t know that would happen,” says Will sharply.

“No, but you knew it *could*. And now it has; and so you shrug your shoulders then cast it to one side and move on. That’s good Will – never be governed by your emotions. Relish them, exploit them, or recruit them, but don’t allow them to control you.”

“It’s not as if my guilt would change anything,” snaps Will.

“Naturally it would not. Besides, there is something horribly indulgent and self-serving about shame or guilt. We reprove and accuse ourselves before anyone else has the opportunity to do so and then seek a sense of virtue in it.” Hannibal’s mouth quirks into a faint smile. “As the expression goes: it is not the priest who absolves the sinner but the confession itself.”

Will draws to an abrupt halt and gives Hannibal a considering look: eyes flashing with a defiant tilt of the chin. “I’m not looking for absolution,” he replies in the same low tone.

Then he raises his voice to a normal volume and adds “Did you still want to see those coroner's reports Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal’s smile broadens slightly then he leans back and runs his eyes over Will’s face, keeping his posture deliberately nonchalant to suggest to any observers that they’re engaged in a casual conversation. “What a magnificent creation you are Will Graham,” he says softly. “So bold and fearless yet still so haunted by your own sense of yourself. You typify the observation that ‘*Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.*’ And yet what a greater tragedy still if you never realise your full potential and were destined to languish in a place like this.” He calmly straightens the collar of his coat and then raises his own voice. “Yes, thank you Inspector; that would be very helpful.”

Will gazes for few seconds into Hannibal’s dark fathomless eyes before flicking down to the sardonic mouth, intensely aware of the way he can feel his own lips parting slightly. “This way then,” he replies curtly. “They’re in the records room.” Then he spins on his heel and sets off towards it, acutely aware of the way he’s quickened his pace in order to get there faster – and gratified to note that Hannibal is doing the same. He holds the door open so that Hannibal can go through first; and then barely has time to close it before he can feel long fingers gripping onto his shoulders and he's whirling round so they can fall onto one another in a clash of teeth and mouths and hands. Hannibal roughly tugs Will’s head back by the hair and runs his tongue up Will’s throat in a warm strip and Will moans so loudly that Hannibal presses his other hand across his mouth, then forces him round again so Will’s back is pressed against his chest. “*Mano meilė*,” he says softly. “There is so much in you that captivates me, but beyond all things it is the way that you walk into the shadows. Collude with them. Converse with them. Engage and empathise with them – don’t you Will? Then emerge again with your spirit unbroken and your reason preserved. It’s why I feel the need to explore you so thoroughly. It would be unforgivable for such a rare thing as you to be misused and wasted.”

Will’s breath hitches at this, head spinning and ribcage heaving unnaturally fast, and overcome with a sudden longing to gasp out ‘I love you’ – only that he can't quite face the vulnerability of being the one to say it first. It’s easier to trade in symbolism instead, like the ring. Emblems and images, what he'd do: *I'd wait for you. I'd fight for you. I'd feel pain for you. I’d kill for you*. Hannibal is so poised, composed and controlling and Will so turbulent and untamed that at times he feels like he’s a wave wildly pounding itself against the side of a cliff. He wrenches his arms behind him instead, twisting at increasingly painful angles to try and work his fingers beneath Hannibal’s shirt and touch bare skin, while Hannibal strokes across Will’s chest; skimming further downwards each time in a tantalizing way until his hands stop just above the waist and Will gives a low whine of frustration. “You know it is not possible my darling,” murmurs Hannibal. “We have seconds only – you are going to have to wait.” Will whines again and Hannibal finally loosens his hold in order to run a finger down Will’s cheek and across his lower lip before cupping his face with his palm. “Although here we have a problem because something as lovely as you should not have to wait *too* long. What do you think?”

“For God’s sake,” snaps Will, struggling to turn round.

Hannibal laughs slightly and tightens his grip with his left arm before rubbing his face against Will's hair. "So after I leave I want you to take care of yourself, right here in Scotland Yard. Be sure to take your time over it and give yourself the greatest possible pleasure: worship your body in the same way I would if I were touching you myself. And pay close attention to each sensation, Will, because I shall expect you to describe it to me afterwards. Every. Single. Thing. How long it lasted and the way it felt. How you moved your hands, your hips, the way you arched your back. What you were thinking of. The expression on your beautiful face. Everything."

Will gives a faint moan then twists his head round so he can scrape his mouth against Hannibal's throat: a delicate bite with sharp white teeth. "I can't do that," he says softly. "You know I can't."

"Really? The same distinction, so soon after the last time? What you actually mean is that you *should* not. Because of course you *can* – and you want to. And you know that you will." He finally relents and dips his hand a little lower, giving a low sigh of satisfaction when he feels how hard Will is. "Perfect – my beautiful cunning boy. Of course you *should* not have sent your admirer after Freddy Lounds. But you *could;* and you did. It's all right Will. You know you don't have to pretend with me, you know that I can see you. That I understand how you *could* bring retribution on Mr Hobbs…how you *could* correct the conduct of the ostler." He briefly tightens his grip once more. "Tell me, Will; what else do you think you can do?"

Will groans again and frantically rocks his hips against Hannibal's hand. "You'll have to wait and see won't you?" he finally manages to say.

"Naturally. How many times have I told you now that I am prepared to wait?" Hannibal kisses the back of Will's neck then abruptly pulls away, reaching up a hand to tidy Will's hair and straighten his jacket. "There you go," he says. "You look quite presentable: ready to blend in once more. Go back now Inspector Graham, and cast in your colours with the force of law and order. None of them are ever going to guess the truth about you...None of them except me." Will stares back, eyes wide and lips slightly parted, and Hannibal makes a low noise deep in his throat that's almost a growl before taking a single step closer. "Ah, my love, how beautiful you are – all your dark desire." He trails his fingers along Will's wrists, over his hips and waist, and then suddenly tugs him forward and buries his face in Will's neck. "I can *smell* it on you," says Hannibal. Then he turns round and is gone.

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Although only a few minutes have passed it feels like several hours and Will staggers back to the meeting room in something of a haze – upon which Jack takes one look at his face and, obviously mistaking the slightly starry-eyed expression for signs of debility, promptly despatches him to his own office to get some rest before the coroner arrives and the whole meeting process begins afresh.

Will is slightly resentful at this, not being particularly taken with the idea of being sent off for a nap like some kind of pensioner (Jack's exact instructions being: "You look like you're about to keel over Mr Graham; and frankly I've got enough to deal with without you swooning all over the meeting room floor") but he obeys anyway because he's undeniably tired – and overwrought, and hugely and guiltily turned on – so the idea of some quiet, restful

space ultimately isn't unappealing. Jack has a battered leather sofa in the corner of his office, and the despite the fact it appears to have been designed with scientific precision to preclude comfort at any conceivable angle, Will contentedly curls up on it and wraps himself up with his coat; but not before obeying Hannibal's instructions and jerking himself off in a kind of frenzy with his left hand clamped over his mouth to stop himself making any noise. He's so terrifically pent up after the previous encounter that it doesn't take long at all and leaves him quivering and panting and also with a sense of being rather depraved for doing such an incredibly shameless thing in Jack's office. Not that Jack will ever know; and Will supposes that if you're going to be depraved, you may as well do it in style and execute your depravity on a sofa in your superintendent's office (while using the memory of highly illegal acts as your masturbation fodder). His hands are still shaking slightly but he cleans himself up with a handkerchief then double and triple-checks the upholstery for any incriminating stains before pulling the coat over his head and falling sound asleep; waking up an hour later to the deeply unedifying sight of Jack Crawford sat behind his desk and staring right at him with a somewhat beady expression. "Sir?" says Will vaguely, resisting the temptation to add: 'Have you been watching me sleep or something, because that's not *remotely* creepy.'

"Mr Graham." Jack picks up his ruler and inspects it thoughtfully before brandishing it in circles in Will's direction. "Feeling better?"

"A bit," replies Will, unable to stop his eyes swivelling back and forth after the ruler.

"You did well this afternoon."

"Really?" says Will perking up.

"No."

"Oh." Will promptly de-perks.

"You looked half asleep the entire time and were completely disengaged until Dr Lecter arrived."

"I know, I'm sorry," says Will, meaning it. "I've been distracted recently."

"Well that's one way of putting it. Look, don't mistake me Mr Graham – I think it's understandable given everything that's happened to you. But seriously, you need to raise your game. I don't mean intellectually; I'm more than satisfied with your contributions to the case in that respect. I'm talking more for your own sake." Jack pauses and looks solemn. "Do you remember what I said to you earlier about not letting your guard down?"

"Yes sir."

"Well *don't*," replies Jack with feeling. "You received that letter yesterday which is disturbing enough by itself, let alone if it really *is* from…him. And I hardly need to tell you that Dr Chilton's got a rather large axe to grind. For God's sake don't do anything to give him further ammunition."

"Is that your speech sir?" asks Will with a slight smile.

“That’s my speech.”

“It’s good – good speech sir.”

Jack rolls his eyes, although he’s begun to smile as well. “The coroner will be here shortly. Up for another session?”

“Yes of course,” says Will scrubbing his hand across his face.

“Splendid,” replies Jack crisply. “By the way a courier brought this for you about ten minutes ago.” He slings an envelope across the desk which Will, who’s still not fully awake, is too uncoordinated to catch and therefore has to endure the embarrassment of hanging over the side of the sofa and rooting around on the floor for it. In this respect it’s managed to lodge itself in a particularly inaccessible crevice, to the extent Will starts to consider that this may well be Jack’s cosmic revenge ploy for jerking off on his sofa (in fact given the unattainable angle it’s as if Jack and the sofa are in it together).

“All right there Mr Graham?” asks Jack with the tiniest hint of sarcasm.

“Sir,” replies Will, with as much dignity as it’s possible to muster while suspended upside down over the side of a sofa on which you’ve been doing a spot of surreptitious self-abuse (to the memory of highly illegal stimulus). After what feels like hours of mortification and a further awkward contortion he finally retrieves the envelope, which turns out to be a very kindly worded note from Alana inviting him round to the house after work.

“Problem?” asks Jack, nodding at the envelope.

“No it’s fine,” says Will happily. “Good news, actually.”

Jack nods again and then narrows his eyes slightly. “Be honest with me Mr Graham,” he says after a pause. “*Are* you all right? You said yourself you’ve been increasingly distracted over the past few days and you clearly haven’t been sleeping.”

“I’m fi…”

Jack holds up a hand. “I want you to be *honest* with me.”

Will falters and then sighs internally, because this is a natural opening for a conversation he knows he needs to have: which is filling Jack in about recent event *vis-à-vis* Matthew Brown. The difficulty is in the best way to approach it: because while Will isn’t fully up to speed with the notoriously convoluted British legal system, there’s a very high probability that insisting Freddy Lounds was the fraudulent author of the *Dear Boss* letter without tangible proof puts Will firmly on the wrong side of the slander laws (and which, combined with subsequent grisly murder of said Freddy Lounds, is going to put Will straight to the top of Jack Crawford’s shit list). Nevertheless it’s hardly the type of thing he can keep to himself.

“So let me get this straight,” says Jack when Will’s finished. “You’re telling me that Jack the Ripper is not only a big Will Graham enthusiast, he’s also partial to a bit of William Blake –

and last night took it upon himself to combine both his hobbies in the middle of the National Gallery?"

"No," replies Will through gritted teeth. "I'm saying that someone who knew Freddy Lounds coined the term 'Jack the Ripper' came up to me in the National Gallery. And that this was the same person who's been following me for some time now."

Jack narrows his eyes again. "How did you say he knew Lounds wrote the letter?"

"He'd overheard him boasting about it in a pub," lies Will blithely. Of course if Matthew Brown is arrested then he's hardly going to confirm this; but fortunately no one beyond Hannibal is aware of Freddy's true treatment of Will, meaning there's no real reason for people to assume he'd invent something so outlandish. There's also the fact that Matthew Brown is a creepy fucker and won't make a particularly plausible witness no matter what he says. Will pauses for a few seconds and then adds: "He'd also seen the article Lounds wrote about me."

Jack draws in a deep breath and then slowly lets it out again. "So…what?" he finally says. "You really think it might have been him?"

"I don't know," replies Will thoughtfully. "It's a hell of a coincidence if not as far as the Lounds murder goes. But even if he is responsible for that then it doesn't prove he's also Jack the Ripper. He's made it clear that he feels some sort of weird affinity with me and wanted to gain my respect and approval; punishing Freddy Lounds might have been his way of trying to do that. Or alternatively there could be a second person who murdered Lounds and this is nothing to do with the Ripper investigation. Regardless though we need to locate Matthew Brown as a matter of urgent priority."

"Agreed," says Jack. "I'll have an alert sent out. Although I have to say Mr Graham, it seems a bit far-fetched."

"On one level, yes it is," replies Will. "But remember when you first showed me the *Dear Boss* letter? The very first time we met?" He pauses for a few seconds, briefly absorbed by how momentously everything has shifted since then. "I said it was a hoax, and then…"

"And then you told me we couldn't know what impact that sort of misrepresentation might be having on the *actual* killer," says Jack. "Yes, I remember. Although what was done to Freddy Lounds bears no resemblance to the Ripper series."

"Except for taking anatomical trophies," points out Will. "And this murder serves a different purpose to the women he kills – the motive is different so it makes sense his methods vary as well. Look sir, I've literally only spent a few minutes with Matthew Brown; I can't say that he's Jack the Ripper and if I'm honest then the initial impressions didn't entirely fit my profile. But something very bizarre is going on and we need to speak with him."

"I might like him for Lounds," replies Jack slowly, "but not for the Whitechapel murders. I mean, the idea that Freddy Lounds was killed by the same person as is murdering all those women…"

“I know sir, but if the *From Hell* letter really was genuine – and I’m still inclined to say that it is – then we know he doesn’t like the term ‘Jack the Ripper’ and that he feels he’s been misrepresented in the press. Freddy Lounds was pretty much the media face of the Ripper investigation – so the link is there.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so Mr Graham,” replies Jack in a solemn tone, “it would appear that at least some of the link is you.”

Will feels a cold chill of fear at the undeniable truth of this, and without even thinking about it presses his palm against his coat pocket to feel the bluntly reassuring bulge of the revolver. “Yes sir,” he says quietly. “I know. I know it is.”

“I think you need to know it son,” replies Jack seriously. “And for God’s sake don’t forget it. You don’t have that luxury anymore, not after that letter. He sees this as a game Mr Graham. And he wants to play with you whether you want it or not.”

There’s something about this statement which resonates with Will in a starkly unsettling way, and in spite of himself he finds his mind cycling back to the scene in the records room; only the most recent, it has to be said, of many such scenes. Agitation, revelation, inspiration…the process of being deconstructed from the inside out. “Play the game,” murmurs Will, more to himself than to Jack.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, it’s nothing,“ says Will. “Just thinking out loud.” And then he smiles and tries to sound sincere, because he knows that he and Jack are no longer talking about the same thing at all.

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Will suffers through the rest of the afternoon with half his mind on the meeting and the other half straying towards Harley Street, before finally admitting defeat and asking permission to leave The Yard an hour before the normal time in order to return to Hannibal as soon as possible whilst allowing for the planned detour to visit Alana and Margot on the way. In this respect waiting on the once-familiar doorstep has a twinge of unreality about it and he can barely recognise the version of himself that last stood here: like visiting a theatre set for a play you were once passionately absorbed by, only to have it exposed as being nothing more than inventive fiction the entire time. *This is the actor playing Will Graham*, the theatre manager would say; and it’d be someone that looked a bit like him, and had the same mannerisms, but close up you’d wonder how you could ever have confused the two. Then he hears the sound of the bolt being drawn back and has to hastily pull himself together in order to greet Alana in a suitably deferential way – and who of course is having none of it, and instead seizes him warmly by the hand and pretends to scold him for being so formal. “Don’t stand on ceremony Will,” she says playfully. “There’s really no need. How well you look! Much better than last time. Come through to the kitchen, Margot’s so impatient to see you.”

Will is immediately glad about this, as the kitchen has an air of ease and casualness about it that would have been impossible to obtain by perching on the stiff-backed drawing room chairs while sipping tea and trying to field questions about *The Tattle Crime* article. There’s a

merry little fire burning in the grate and he can't help breaking into a smile at the sight of Margot: sat at the table cleaning silverware with her hair knotted up in a scarf, a smudge of polish on her cheek, and generally radiating an air of unreserved familiarity that immediately puts him at his ease. He pulls up the chair opposite hers: and after Margot has shaken his hand and accidentally got polish on it, and Will has tried to scrub it off then rubbed his forehead and inadvertently got it on his face as well, and Alana has laughed over the pair of them and told them they look like a couple of chimney sweeps, and Margot has insisted that Will, as the skinnier of the two, would certainly be the junior partner who got sent up the chimneys while she waited at the bottom and charmed the homeowners and collected the money, then it's almost like he's never been away at all.

Alana pours Will some tea from the familiar pot with the roses round the lid, and he's touched to notice from the pale golden hue that she's prepared the more expensive Chinese tea rather than the everyday Indian blend. "Thank you, this is a real treat," he says now, gesturing at the cup. In actual fact it's not (Hannibal naturally refusing to have anything less than peerless Chinese tea in the house) but he wants to show that he's appreciative of the attention, even if he currently has the type of lifestyle where Chinese tea is just one of numerous daily luxuries. In fact in this respect Will suspects that he's becoming slightly spoilt. Possibly even *pampered* (for God's sake). He takes a cautious sip of the tea and smiles at Margot from over the top of his cup.

"The brooches were utterly perfect," says Alana kindly as she offers Will a slice of seed cake. "Exactly the right shade for each of us. Thank you so much."

"I had a bit of help," admits Will. "I described you both to the jeweller and he suggested what to pick." Memories of *Debrett's Guide to Etiquette* promptly come to mind as soon he's said this and he suddenly feels concerned that this was a disrespectful thing to have done. "I hope you don't mind," he adds hurriedly. "I mean he was old – quite elderly in fact."

"Don't look so anxious Will," says Margot merrily. "You can take my name in vain with as many gentlemen as you like if it means I get lovely jewellery like this at the end of it."

Will smiles gratefully and then takes another sip of his tea before clearing his throat and gazing rather shyly at them both. "I'm so sorry I didn't get in touch with you sooner," he says. "I really ought to have done I know, but…well..."

"It's *completely* understandable," says Alana in a soothing tone, "so please don't give it another thought. More importantly: how are you now?"

"Better. Much better. Thank you."

"It must have been terrible for you," adds Margot in her forthright way. "I won't deny that we were shocked when we saw it, but it was obvious that the journalist had an agenda and was slanting the facts appallingly."

"I know – and you're right, he did. But the essence of it was true." Will hesitates then swallows audibly. "I was so ashamed of what you might think of me."

"There were clear extenuating circumstances," says Alana gently.

Will carefully replaces his cup in its saucer and forces himself to look them both in the eye. "I just wanted to say…I wanted you to know that I would never have harmed you. I mean never. Even if I was ill."

"Well really Will," says Margot with a slight wink. "I would like to see you *try*."

Will can't help laughing at this and Margot laughs too then raises her own cup in his direction as if proposing a toast. "You know you're welcome back here," she adds. "We've kept your room as you left it. Don't feel as if you have to stay away."

"Thank you," replies Will, who's tremendously touched by this. "I'd like to, I really would. I mean I probably shall, it's just…" he falters, suddenly unsure of the best way to proceed.

"But you're happy where you are?" says Alana with a gentle smile and a very slight glance at Margot.

Will immediately notices the glance and can feel himself starting to blush. "Yes, I *am*," he replies after another pause and with a small hint of defensiveness. "But nevertheless I can't really stay there."

"Why not? If you like it so much?"

"Because it's…it would…" He takes a deep breath. "It's the way it would *look*," he finally says.

"How would it look?" asks Margot bluntly.

"It would look inappropriate," replies Will even though the word feels clumsy and foreign in his mouth, like a piece of food that's too stale to properly chew. He's never been average, never conformed – has always seen respectability as a method of social control. *Improper, indecorous, unsuitable*: the type of values he normally despises and has no time for. And yet how desirable they seem now if they could be the means of granting openness about his newfound state of longing. Ridiculous really, as from the way their bright eyes are running over his face he can't help suspecting that they've both intuited exactly what the dilemma is; indeed, can't help feeling that he *wants* them to intuit it. That he wants other people to know, even though the reality of directly confessing it is impossible. *I've fallen in love with someone*, he wants to say. *Someone who sees me; someone who understands.* And why not, after all, when it's what everyone else does…surely it's not much to ask? Briefly he remembers Sergeant Matthews telling the other officers about his fiancée: her eyes, her hair, her sweet singing voice, her fondness for embroidery and watercolours, the way her cheeks go pink when she laughs. Trivial little details rendered noble and poetic through the force of love – and the type of conversations that Will himself is never going to be able to have. Who, after all, can Will sit down with and describe the endearing way in which Hannibal's accent gets stronger when he's tired, or how they can anticipate each other's reactions, or share a comfortable silence, or how it feels to lie against him and listen to his heartbeat, or the way that his eyes lengthen when he smiles (which admittedly isn't all that often; and yet when they do appear are nearly always directed at Will)?

“What exactly is it that’s inappropriate?” asks Margot, abruptly interrupting this melancholy train of thought. “The neighbourhood? The residence itself? Or the person you’re sharing it with?” Alana glances at her sharply as if to suggest that this approach is too direct, and Margot gives him a slightly apologetic look before adding in a softer tone: “Society considers so many things inappropriate Will, but it still manages to overlook a great many of them in the end. And if the participants are discreet and go about their business without alarming all the *respectable* people.” She gives a mischievous little smile. “Then it’s often possible to be marvellously inappropriate without consequences of any kind.”

“Yes, don’t be too downcast.” Alana appears to be choosing her words very carefully. “There’s usually a place for all of us in the end.”

Will nods absently at this, because while it *sounds* very nice in theory it surely can’t be generally true. At least not for everyone…at least not for people like him. Nevertheless he adds, “I’d like to think so,” in what he hopes is a suitably fervent tone so as not to appear ungrateful for the reassurance.

Alana looks at him meditatively and Will can’t help noticing the way Margot’s slim hand is slowly stealing over hers. “Tell me Will,” she says after a small pause. “Do you care for Mr Hardy’s novels?”

“Not really,” replies Will apologetically, wishing he could say that he loved them. “I’ve never read any.”

“His most recent: *Jude the Obscure*. It reminds me of this conversation. Just a little,” she adds hastily, as if to emphasise that she’s not assuming anything about Will’s circumstances. “It’s the general conflict I suppose, however it might be played out: the struggle to live a self-defined life in the face of social constraints and disapproval. In the story the protagonist falls in love with a woman who’s opposed to marriage. He can’t bring himself to leave her, so they take the very bold step of living together despite not being man and wife. Of course it creates a terrible scandal and society rejects them.”

“So what do they do?”

“They vow not to give up on one another and to move somewhere new where no one knows them.”

“But don’t those people find out too?”

“Yes, but you see that’s part of the couple’s resolution: that they’ll just move on again and find somewhere else. And then somewhere else, and somewhere else after that; on and on...as long as it takes for the world to change.”

Will finds that he doesn’t quite know how to respond to this, so ultimately just bites his lip and stares intensely into his cup as if there’s something of incredible fascination at the bottom of it. Then he becomes horribly aware of a sudden, ludicrous impulse to actually *cry* and so busies himself with vowing that if he dares to do such a thing then the punishment will be mortal. *If you cry now I will KILL you*, Will informs himself firmly, *and I have a goddamn gun in my coat pocket so don’t even think about fucking with me*. Then he makes a visible

effort to pull himself together before calmly thanking them both for their advice; upon which Margot smiles and tells him he's welcome, while Alana smiles too and then gracefully yet tactfully changes the subject: and in the end they just drink the tea and eat the cake and discuss harmless subjects until it's five o'clock and time for Will to leave.

"We're in no hurry to re-let the room," Margot tells him as he's pulling on his coat, "so take as long as you need to reach a decision about…things."

"Thank you," says Will sincerely. "I appreciate that."

"And remember what we discussed," adds Alana without specifying exactly which part of the conversation she's referring to.

Will catches her eye and smiles rather shyly. "I'm going to," is all he says.

"Well off you go then," adds Margot with a smile of her own. "Upon my word, how cold it is." She and Alana wrap their shawls tighter around their shoulders then link arms and stand on the doorstep to wave Will off as he hovers in the road to hail a passing hackney coach. After it's drawn to a halt he holds up his hand to them one last time in silent acknowledgement then turns resolutely to the driver.

"Harley Street," says Will in a firm, clear voice, "quickly please – as quick as you can."

"Right you are guvn'r," replies the driver good-naturedly and Will climbs in and huddles against the leather seat, occasionally pressing his hand beneath his scarf to run his fingers over the edge of the tie pin before letting his cheek brush against his shoulder where the coat fabric carries a faint, lingering scent of Hannibal's expensive cologne. Then he fleetingly remembers Hannibal's words the evening Will escaped from Dr Chilton – "*So you did find your way back again?"* – and the memory of it makes him smile. *Always*, thinks Will. *Always, always, no matter where you are*; *as long as it takes for the world to change*.

The horses, unnerved by the force of the wind and swirls of snow, are fretful and restive and it takes a few moments for the driver to coax them under control and manoeuvre the cab to the right side of the road. The rocking motion knocks Will against the window and when he glances out he can see the row of elm trees that line the street directly in front of him: dancing and weaving in the wind like witches at a stormy Sabbath. The sight is actually a rather striking one yet Will doesn't pay them any attention: he's seen them so many times; why should he care? So as the cab rolls away he averts his eyes and remains oblivious to the way their silhouettes lurch across the cobblestones in a macabre crosshatch of spindly black. He doesn't see the way one of the shadows solidifies as it begins to separate from the others. Doesn't see the way it gradually creeps into the light and becomes a human figure. He doesn't see any of it: not the twitching limbs; or the way it turns its head towards the departing carriage as the snow pelts down; nor the way in which it swivels back, very slowly and deliberately, as it begins to fixedly stare at the doorway in which Alana and Margot were standing only a few seconds before.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay with this chapter my lovelies. To be honest I got to the point I needed an AO3 break, but am hoping to resume weekly updates as normal ASAP. And in this respect anyone who leaves me shouty messages from now on has to leave their business cards as well. Y'know…for my 'records.' Yeah that's right Shouty Anons – come and join my rodelex of rudes *maniacal cackle*

A few people were asking me about regard rings and while I would love to say I was creative enough to have invented that, they were totally a real thing. Here're some Victorian ones spelling out regard, dearest and an ever-so-slightly creepy looking Georgian one spelling god knows what. Turning it into a tie pin was artistic license though, and as far as I'm aware the gemstone acrostic was only ever used in rings.

I've also been asked whether the references to homosexuality being illegal are exaggerated, and while I wish this was invented it's sadly completely true – sexual relationships between men weren't decriminalised in Britain until 1967. Incidentally this was never the case for women, as politicians considered it impossible for two women to have sex (!) so saw no point in making a law against it. Hard labour refers to a specific form of punishment in the Victorian era that involved things like walking on a treadmill or turning cranks as part of your prison term - Oscar Wilde was famously sentenced to two years hard labour for 'indecency' in 1895.

The Ten Bells is still running today in Spitalfields (and is actually very nice). The association described here is genuine as two victims of the Whitechapel murders were known to be regular customers.

Jude the Obscure wasn't published until a few years after this story was set, but see earlier author notes about my hack historical inaccuracies. Also Thomas Hardy was such a massively irreverent badass that he deserves a mention (although don't actually read Jude the Obscure because it's as depressing as all hell, omg).

Wishing you all a wonderful new year and see you soon for the next one :-)

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite urging the driver to be as quick as possible the carriage still takes a frustratingly long time to reach Harley Street. On arrival Will flings the fare at the driver then hurls himself out the cab before running down the pavement and knocking briskly on the door, twitching with impatience for each second that it takes Mary to answer it: which admittedly isn't many seconds at all, but still feels like several hours when filtered through the lens of eager anticipation. What's taking so long? Surely they haven't all gone out for the evening? Will does an irritated shuffle that involves both feet, both hands, and a slight contortion of the neck from left to right (like a *lizard*, thinks Will with morbid interest upon catching sight of his reflection in the doorpane); then has to abruptly straighten upright when he hears the key turning in the lock. "Oh good evening sir," says Mary. "This is a pleasant surprise. I wasn't expecting you for another hour or so."

"Yes, I left the Yard early," replies Will. He can't help noticing that she always calls him 'sir' now as opposed to 'Inspector Graham' and can't decide whether this is a good thing or not. Possibly it could be considered a sign of familiarity, given that she never addresses Hannibal as 'Dr Lecter' to his face either…although more likely the whole conjecture is pointless and it doesn't mean anything at all. Nevertheless, and despite her kindly deferential manner, he's unable to shake a lingering sense of awkwardness around her because he knows she helped nurse him when he was ill and feels that the knowledge puts him at a disadvantage. She's seen him out of his head with delirium after all, and no doubt speaking fluent crap as a result; possibly she's even seen him *naked.* Although she's nearly old enough to be his mother so maybe it doesn't matter all that much (it does). In some ways the speculation makes it worse, although short of asking her outright – which is clearly not an option – there's no way to ever be sure. Briefly he tries to imagine it: 'Look, Mary, just level with me on this so we can move on and put it behind us…have you seen me naked or not?'

"Sir?" says Mary.

"Y-e-s," replies Will.

"I said that Dr Lecter is in his consulting room."

"Oh right, thank you. Is anyone with him?"

"No he's alone. He asked me to show you in when you arrived."

"Oh, okay," says Will, trying not to smile too obviously. "But don't trouble yourself, I'll make my own way."

"Very good sir," replies Mary. "May I take your coat and hat for you?" So Will awkwardly wriggles out of them, and Mary receives both with such excessive politeness that anyone would think Will was doing her an enormous favour in handing them over. Then she

administers the usual neat curtsey and vanishes down the stairs, with Will staring after her for a few seconds in mute anxiety (oh God, though – *has* she?) before spinning round and heading towards the consulting room with a rather embarrassing pace that's not entirely a run but isn't exactly a walk either.

Hannibal is coiled up in the usual chair in front of the fireplace, lithe and chiselled as a statuette and so still he could be sitting for a portrait (something worked in oils in an elaborate gilt frame, reflects Will, possibly titled *The Thinker*), and immediately glances up with a slow smile when Will comes in. "Back so soon?" he asks; and then, as Will starts moving towards him: "No, stay there a moment – let me look at you." He tips his head back slightly and runs his eyes up and down in a lingering way that makes Will's breath hitch. "Curious isn't it? It's only been a matter of hours, yet it feels as though you've been away from me for weeks at a time."

"Yeah, well, I'm here now."

"Certainly you are," replies Hannibal in a voice that's so crooning and resonant it could almost be a purr. "Now shut the door please and come a little closer." Will takes a few steps forward and then stops again; Hannibal's smile broadens. "Clo-ser," he adds softly. There's something distinctly odd about the tone Will decides; impossibly sensuous and yet with a vague twist of menace woven just below the surface. It doesn't even make any sense; how can a hint of threat manage to be so irresistible? And yet it is. Perhaps there's no real sense in trying to understand why.

"Perfect," says Hannibal once Will is stood almost directly in front of his chair. "Although the arrangement could be improved upon. You're hunching your shoulders; pull them back please. And straighten your spine." Will rolls his eyes yet complies. "There – *much* better. Stand proud. Posture is important; it indicates assertiveness or submission. Besides, you have such a striking figure you should learn to display it to full advantage."

"Hardly," says Will with a slight scoff.

Hannibal doesn't bother responding to this; merely closes his eyes then inhales deeply as if breathing Will in and savouring him. "Exquisite," he says after a pause. "You smell...*incendiary*."

"Oh yeah?" says Will, attempting to be flippant to conceal how overwhelmed he's beginning to feel. "Sure you're not confusing me with the fireplace?"

"Not at all," replies Hannibal, whose eyes are still closed. "It is entirely your own. The warmth of it, the luminosity; like solidified light. And of course the more elevated the light the longer the shadow it casts. Such a very brilliant light, aren't you Will? All burning fragments and blazing shards – always yearning to fuel the inferno even further." He suddenly flicks his eyes open with an abruptness that's slightly startling. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"No," says Will. "Not really."

Hannibal, undeterred, stretches out and then hooks his ankles around one of Will's legs like he's trying to trap him. "Light and darkness," he says thoughtfully. "I am always describing your inherent contradictions to you and you never want to listen. Not that it really matters I suppose. Duality thrives quite comfortably whether acknowledged or not; just as the moth hunts by moonlight and the butterflies have the day." He leans back again in his chair and then tips his head to the side once more as if trying to consider Will from the most precise possible angle. "How I have been missing you, Will Graham. You have a talent for making your absence felt."

"Good," says Will. "I missed you too."

"Is it good?" asks Hannibal rhetorically. Will doesn't reply immediately and Hannibal gives his leg a sudden tug so that Will stumbles a few paces forward. "At any rate we have the preliminaries out the way so I suppose we can continue. We've both been waiting after all." He darts out a hand to make sure Will has regained his balance and then runs his eyes over him again before calmly adding, almost as if it's an afterthought: "Take your clothes off."

Will's mouth quirks into a smile. "Aren't you going to ask me nicely?"

Hannibal begins to smile himself then leans back in the chair and steeples his fingers in front of his face, never once taking his eyes off Will.

"I take it that's no?"

Hannibal's smile grows fractionally wider. "Dearest Will," he says. "I am still waiting. Please don't make me repeat myself."

"Or what?" asks Will defiantly.

"Or else," replies Hannibal, his smile becoming even broader as Will reaches up and slowly flicks open the top button of his shirt. "That's it, good boy. Pull the collar down and show me your throat. You see? It is not so difficult to be obedient for once, is it? Second button please; and now the rest. Pull it open, but do it slowly. *Very* good, Will. Keep your eyes on me. Now slip the shirt down over your shoulders." This continues for some time, Hannibal choreographing the precise timing and placement of every single piece of clothing with increasing relish until Will is stood in front of him completely naked; trembling slightly and caught in a heady combination of self-consciousness and helpless, hopeless arousal. He still looks rather wan, Hannibal decides: the sleepless night having smudged shadows around his eyes and made his luminous skin even paler than usual; and altogether seeming as slender, willowy, and demon-haunted as an El Greco saint. In this respect a rather sumptuous palette of scars are clearly visible on his arms and torso, although they seem less like imperfections than they do embellishments; blemishes that would be sad or unsightly on anyone else, yet gain a certain distinction through having the good fortune to wind across Will's body. Like *craquelure* on a particularly arresting portrait or patina on stone: testimony and witness-bearing to a lifetime of resilience. In turn the numerous bruises, put there by Hannibal, stand out with a bright-edged bloom that makes him appear deceptively fragile and, if possible, even more appealing.

“Come here *mylimasis*,” says Hannibal in a gentler voice. He reaches out and takes hold of Will’s waist, rubbing his thumbs in the delicate hollow of both hip bones, then pulls him forward until he’s at the right angle for Hannibal to lower his head and achieve his long postponed ambition of cradling Will’s beautiful cock with one firm warm palm before lovingly running his tongue around the head; beginning with a tantalising flicking movement that graduates to slow licks and shallow dips, then worshipfully long, languorous sucks, and taking his time in order to savour every single second as if Will is something delicious that he can’t get enough of.

“Oh – *yes*,” gasps Will. He grips hold of Hannibal’s shoulders in an attempt to stay upright, shuddering helplessly as his head tips back. The sensation is so intense he feels like he’s about to snap. “That’s incredible. Your *mouth*, oh God…”

Hannibal sighs with satisfaction himself, and even though he doesn’t want Will to come like this still can’t resist the temptation of briefly swallowing him down until he can feel Will’s cock sliding against the back of his throat. Will quivers convulsively then makes a low moaning noise, so Hannibal reluctantly pulls away before manoeuvring Will down until he’s spread across Hannibal’s lap with his head nestled against his shoulder. There’s something about the positioning which makes him appear deeply vulnerable – not least the fact he’s naked while Hannibal remain fully clothed – wherein the expanse of long slim limbs and delicate skin make him resemble a sliver of porcelain; priceless and perfectly hewn, yet just as liable to break. *Oh Will,* thinks Hannibal, pressing soft kisses along the side of his throat and overcome by a powerful surge of tenderness that wishes to caution Will against being so trusting whilst also feeling overwhelmed with charm by it.

“Lean backwards for me,” he murmurs into the top of Will’s head. “Let me see your face. It's alright, I've got you; I won't let you fall. Now open your mouth.” Keeping one hand pressed between Will’s shoulder blades to keep him upright he slides a finger into Will’s mouth to wet it before slowing reaching round trailing down his spine. “Did you do what I told you after I left?”

Will starts to reply, then groans as he feels a long finger pushing deep inside him so abandons speech and simply nods instead. He’s not really ready and it feels slightly too much, yet at the same time – fuck – nowhere *near* enough. “Very good,” says Hannibal approvingly. “My beautiful, shameless boy. So new to all this, and yet already so desperate for it.” He waits for a few seconds, relishing how tight Will feels and the way he’s quivering and gasping in response to the slowly stabbing finger, yet at the same time oddly aware of how having his instructions obeyed is actually far less satisfying than anticipated. Hannibal takes a moment to examine this and quickly realises it’s because he’s resenting the idea of Will enjoying his body and getting pleasure from it without Hannibal being there to oversee the process. In fact it’s rather intolerable to think of Will *ever* taking charge of his needs independently without allowing Hannibal the opportunity to take care of him first. Hannibal now frowns at how disagreeable this insight is – not because it’s jealous or overly controlling but because it’s irrational (jealousy being both understandable and permissible where Will is concerned whereas irrationality, in all its forms, is just deeply tedious). Nevertheless – there it is. Hannibal sighs slightly at himself, although still can’t resist the urge to place a possessive hand on the back of Will’s neck.

Will, oblivious in turn to any of this, gasps even louder and frantically bucks his hips before falling forwards again and burying his face in Hannibal's shoulder while Hannibal strokes his back with his free hand. "*What* a thing to do in the middle of Scotland Yard," he says caressingly. "How wonderfully unprincipled you are. And yet it still wasn't enough to satisfy you was it? Look at you: this sweet, wanton little body. So needy. So eager to be filled up again."

"Oh God, yes, *yes*. I loved the way you felt inside me. I *loved* it."

"I know you did my dearest, I could tell. I've never seen anything so beautiful. Were you thinking about it today?"

"All day. You were on my mind the entire time. God, I was so turned on. If you'd been there you would have been able to smell it." Hannibal takes a deep intake of breath, so low it's almost a hiss, and scrapes his teeth against the side of Will's neck. "I came so hard I was shaking. I had to bite my hand to stop myself making any noise."

"Did you? My poor darling. Then I am going to have to take care of you now, aren't I? Get on the floor for me – hands and knees and then spread your legs."

Will gives a slight moan then pulls Hannibal toward him for a kiss which is rough and urgent, a silent confession of love in lips and tongues and warm breath, before grinding their bodies together in a rather desperate way as if it's impossible to ever get truly close enough. "*Mylimasis*," murmurs Hannibal tenderly, briefly pulling away to brush his lips along Will's jaw and throat before cradling his face in his palm. "My love. How you overpower me."

Will moans again and then wraps his arms round Hannibal's neck. "I need you," he says, almost helplessly. "I need you so much."

"I know," replies Hannibal, in the same soft voice. "I need you too." He gently gathers Will up in both arms and lays him on the rug in front of the fireplace where he'll be comfortable and warm, then leans over to retrieve a small phial of mineral oil from his desk before kneeling down and helping Will partially pull himself upright – irritably aware the entire time that he's still wearing his own clothes and yet far too impatient to waste the time required to remove them. In fact Will looks almost unbearably inviting like this: lovely in a distinctly masculine way, with his small tight hole slightly flushed and swollen from the previous friction of Hannibal's fingers and practically begging to be penetrated again as deep and hard as possible. Hannibal drenches his hand with the oil and then spends some time simply stroking in slow teasing circles with the pad of one finger before pushing in to the first joint, murmuring combinations of praise and encouragement at the fact that Will is now so loosened and relaxed that, unlike the last time, there's no resistance at all. Then he abandons self-control entirely and slides his finger as deep as he can before working in a second and fucking Will with them in a hard, relentless rhythm: completely captivated both by the sounds Will's starting to make and how pretty he looks when stretched around Hannibal's fingers – luscious, in fact, and so very ready to be taken. He drizzles out a little more oil over his fingers with his free hand and Will moans even louder and then rapturously arches backwards, tilting his hips to get the pressure exactly where he most wants it. There's something about the way it looks that Hannibal finds rather lovely and yet, given his previous reflections, also provoking – the sense that Will is once again pursuing pleasure in a way that

excludes him. So he presses down on Will's back to encourage him to stay still then carries on working him open for a few more moments before quickly unfastening his belt with his free hand and withdrawing his fingers entirely so he can take hold of his cock and suggestively rub the slick head against Will's frantic, trembling body.

"Is this what you want?" he says, soft and intense. "You want to feel me inside you?"

Will makes a fretful whimpering noise but refuses to beg; and Hannibal, with something like surprise, realises that he has no real wish to force him to on the grounds that Will pleading and submissive is not as inherently appealing as Will ecstatic and sensuous – and that right now he has far less interest in dominating Will than he has in simply making love to him. Then he's about to tell Will to lie down before changing his mind and deciding on something even better, so leans against the foot of the chair instead and lifts Will onto his knee before spreading him wide open and then gently yet firmly lowering him down.

"Oh fuck, *fuck,*" gasps out Will. He screws his eyes closed and then grips onto Hannibal's shoulders, obviously struggling with how deep the angle feels. "Oh God, it's too much. I don't know if I can."

"Just breathe," says Hannibal softly, skimming his palms up and down Will's back. "Then bear down, as if you're trying to push me out. Slowly. That's it – perfect." He leans further back and angles his own hips to provide a bit more room, then delicately strokes his thumb over Will's cheekbone. "It hurts?"

"A little," says Will through gritted teeth.

"Exquisite pain," replies Hannibal caressingly. He can see that Will's beautiful erection has virtually disappeared so reaches down to begin stroking him back to hardness again, gripping along the length with a touch that's warm and firm while rubbing his thumb around the head. "Good boy. You like that don't you? Besides, with a temperament such as yours pain can only ever make you stronger. No – don't close your eyes, I want to see you. And speak to me too *mylimasis*, I want to hear what you're thinking." Will makes an irritated sound and Hannibal smiles and then presses his free hand against one of Will's trembling legs to help him keep his balance. "Your body is one thing but I want to know your mind as well."

Will gasps out something that sounds like 'Why?' then with a visible effort pushes himself further down until nearly the entire length of Hannibal's thick cock is buried inside him, beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead at the intensity of it.

"Because your intelligence…excites me," says Hannibal, his own breath starting to catch. "Your insight. Your perception. The way you see what no one else can." He begins to move his hand a little faster. "You're getting so wet my darling; so excited. It feels good doesn't it? To be so gifted?"

Will shakes his head, confused by the double clause in the question, and Hannibal's hand immediately goes still. "Don't stop," says Will, a bit desperately. "Yes, it does, *yes*. It feels good."

"Yes," repeats Hannibal softly. "Like the way you interpret the evidence."

“Yes,” says Will, a bit wildly.

“And infer the motive.”

“Yes.”

“Assume another perspective.”

“*Yes*. Oh God, please don’t stop.”

Hannibal pauses a few seconds until Will is on the verge of begging before starting to move his hand again. “Like the way you knew there were two separate killers,” he says quietly. “You mentioned it the very first time we met, didn’t you: sat in my consulting room and staring at me in your bright young virtuosity. That’s when I knew, Will. *This one is not like the others*, I said to myself. *There is something special about him.*”

“Of course there’re two,” Will finally manages to say, then moans again as Hannibal takes hold of his waist and gently helps him start to rock his hips up and down. “The first Ripper’s nothing like the second one.”

“No?” murmurs Hannibal. He lets go of Will’s waist and tugs his head back by the hair, leaning forward to kiss his throat. “So what is he like?”

“I don’t…*God*, why the hell do you want to discuss this now?”

“I told you,” repeats Hannibal calmly. With his other hand he curls his long fingers around Will’s cock again, sighing with pleasure at how hot, hard and aching it feels. “I find your intelligence almost unbearably…exciting.”

“Oh God. *Fuck*,” gasps Will as Hannibal’s hand begins to move more insistently. Then he renews his desperate grip on Hannibal’s shoulders and closes his eyes as he tries to envisage the police reports; all those lonely hours in his room poring over them one by one. The initial impressions, the instincts. The narrative that emerged from each page, so alive and vital when torn from behind the dry typescript and fusty pages, like a gothic *Grand Guignol* tragedy performed just for him – the only one who could see it. Then he makes another groaning sound because the pressure from Hannibal’s teeth seems to be all over his skin at intervals even though he’s not actually being bitten. “There’s an artfulness to what he does,” Will finally replies, and when he speaks his voice sounds faint and faraway, as if he’s reciting something hewn from within himself; endlessly rehearsed internally and only now being uttered aloud. “An *elegance*.” Hannibal rolls his hips upwards and Will gives another breathy moan. “Oh God, yes, *yes*, that feels so good.”

“I know it does my love. *So* good. What else do you see?”

“Staging means everything to him…Oh God, Hannibal…”

“You’re doing so well my darling. Now tell me why that matters.”

“Because they’re tableaux. The *way* something’s presented matters as much as what he presents.”

Hannibal trails his free hand down Will's back and then pushes roughly against his hips, encouraging him to move faster and harder, then feeling a fresh flush of wetness over his palm as Will helplessly leaks more pre-come over it. "*Yes*. What else?"

"He's unique," says Will without meaning to, but the words are spilling out and he can't stop them now. "Sadistic yet virtuosic. Theatrical yet meticulous. Oh God, please don't stop, I – I think I'm going to…oh God. I'm going to come."

"What else Will?"

"His violence is highly controlled," Will gasps out. "He wants to transmute the vulgar and banal and make it beautiful." Purifying and reifying the base elements into the noble ones… and he has a sudden jarring memory of Hannibal's words to him in that first meeting – *You're quite the alchemist aren't you?* – and then again in response to hearing about Hobbs' murder: *You have wrenched ugliness out of the world and left something beautiful in its place. Your actions transformed what is unworthy and useless into something artistic*. Without fully understanding why he can feel himself starting to panic, and yet, oh God, *God*, everything feels so good. Will makes a noise that's part confusion, part distress; and desperately trying to drown in physical sensation as respite from what's threatening to begin screaming within his skull. Because he can almost see it now, flickering in his peripheral vision: blood-streaked and bone-tinged, tattered black feathers like flecks of tar, shadows crouching and crawling …

"Yes," says Hannibal softly. He catches hold of Will's hips to briefly force him to stay still. "It often happens that true tragedy acquires the artistic elements of beauty. You understand that don't you? You don't see the world the same way he does, yet you can assume his point of view."

For a few seconds Will feels his eyes widening with something like shock. "No. No…I don't…"

"Yes Will," replies Hannibal softly. "*You do*."

Will shakes his head, panicked and unsure, yet surreally aware of the way he's gasping "Please don't…please don't…please," even as he's thrusting his whole body down, trying to take it as deep as possible and leaning in to seek out hard-edged kisses that bruise and bite. Who knows exactly why? Will doesn't. And there he is, saying it again, in between all the small scared noises he also can't help making: "*Please, please, please, I need this. I need you*." And oh God, fuck, he's so close now, *so* close…

"Perfect," says Hannibal as a deep tremor runs through Will's body. "*Yes*. Here it is." Will gasps senselessly, being too far gone to respond, and Hannibal lifts him up and pushes him onto the floor once more, holding onto Will's shoulder with one hand and his hip with the other then driving into him with such force that Will's arms give way and he presses his forehead against the rug and cries out as he starts to come. Hannibal fucks him right through it and for a few ecstatic moments he's completely oblivious to everything except how good it feels, only gradually becoming aware of Hannibal giving one final hard thrust before pulling out and kissing Will's hipbone, leaving Will feeling so slick and wet and fucked wide open in a way that should possibly feel degrading and yet…doesn't.

“Oh God,” says Will faintly. “That was – oh my God.” Then he quivers again as he feels Hannibal’s fingers sliding inside him before being pressed, shiny and glistening, against his lips while Hannibal murmurs “Open your mouth Will.” And then Will is eagerly licking Hannibal’s come off his fingers and moaning slightly as Hannibal strokes his face and calls him a good boy. Because he wants that – he can’t help it, he does. He wants to be Hannibal’s good boy, and also his bad one. And something more than that again, something that’s not even to do with Hannibal; which is the sense of Will simply wanting his own irredeemable complexity. Of wanting what he shouldn’t have. In fact the sudden awareness is so abrupt and shocking that Will finds he can’t bring himself to fully deal with it and so just collapses onto the floor instead and stares numbly in the smouldering remains of the fire, weirdly fascinated by the way the flames writhe and snap. *It’s like I’m too full*, he thinks hazily and this much, at least, is true: because he *is*. It’s like struggling to contain two different people. One too right and one too wrong, one life that’s lived and one that’s only thought about – an entire concerto of contradiction. In fact it’s as if this twin is here right now, also gazing into the fire: the exact opposite of Will, and yet also exactly like him, biding his time and lying in wait. He’s both symmetry and adversary – a dark mirror image – and the idea of his existence, taken to its logical conclusion, surely means that Will is destined to break…A clean snap, straight down the middle.

At the thought of this Will screws his eyes tight shut, fighting to repress the swell of panic and trying to console himself that it doesn’t mean anything, not really; he’s just tired and overly emotional and therefore taking everything far too literally. Besides it’s not like there’s anything *wrong* with dichotomy. Surely what’s more important is the way it’s managed rather than the fact it exists; just a case of establishing harmony and concurrence between the separate impulses and resisting a hierarchy. Like Hannibal’s analogy of the moths and butterflies: darkness and light. Isn’t a measure of dualism inevitable anyway – even necessary? The world needs it divisions and oppositions, just as Will does. Joy couldn’t exist without sadness, after all, just like truth can’t exist without lies. No passion without apathy, no knowledge without ignorance, no pleasure without pain. Just as light is part of darkness, and creation needs destruction. And as death is a condition of life.

Behind him he can feel Hannibal running his palm up and down his back, like someone smoothing out a piece of material, and Will forces himself to focus on the touch as a means of grounding and steadying himself. Then he pays careful attention to his breathing: one breath *in* and one breath *out* (another natural opposition) and reminds himself that everything’s fine and there’s nothing to feel so tormented over. It’s not as if he even has the physical or mental energy required for such soul-searching anyway. Not now. Not ever. *I can’t,* thinks Will, *I can’t I can’t*. And so – he doesn’t. Then he tells himself instead that it’s all in his imagination. Just a phantom impulse, falsely created in the intensity of the moment, and no more real or lasting than the flickering images that twist around in the fire.

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For the next half hour Will basks in an exhausted sated heap, and Hannibal leans over him and covetously runs his long fingers across Will’s skin while admiring how graceful he looks and wishing a way could be contrived of levering his skull open and inspecting all the thoughts and impulses subsisting there. *I would be so gentle*, thinks Hannibal, regretful at this denied opportunity. *I only wish to know you*. Then he wonders if there’s any possibility of

convincing Will to allow himself to be drawn as he is now so that the moment can be preserved for posterity. Although admittedly most likely not…in fact almost certainly not. Which means it'll have to be crafted from memory instead: no particular trouble in practical terms, but a sad forfeit of the pleasures of a real life modelling. Nevertheless as enthralling as the spectacle is, and as loathe as Hannibal is to disturb him, the evening is drawing on and there are still certain things which need to be accomplished. "Go to bed if you're tired my love," Hannibal finally says. "As appealing as the sight may be I'm afraid I can't have anyone finding beautiful naked young men asleep on my rug."

"In a minute," says Will sleepily.

Hannibal continues stroking for a few more moments before smiling slightly to himself and then announcing, apropos of nothing: "You are no longer taking that medication I prescribed, are you?"

Will eyes briefly flicker open before closing again. "I told you I would keep taking it."

"I know you did. But that doesn't answer my question."

"I said that I would," repeats Will stubbornly. "Wouldn't you be able to tell if I'd stopped? I'm not getting the same symptoms after all."

"Hmmm," says Hannibal, privately stowing this information away for future use. "At any rate you need to go to bed; you can't stay here all evening."

"In a minute," mutters Will.

"You said that a minute ago."

"Well ask me again in another minute," replies Will without opening his eyes; at which point Hannibal sighs audibly before taking off his jacket, briskly bundling Will up in it, and then hoisting him up without any visible effort and bearing him off upstairs.

"Oh God, stop it," says Will trying not to laugh. "I look ridiculous like this. You don't need to carry me, I'm not a child."

"Asides from a tendency to roll around on the floor and refuse to put your clothes on."

"Hmm, very true," agrees Will before adding, with typical acuteness, "although you're not genuinely concerned about someone seeing me, not this late. You want me out the way. You're up to something aren't you?"

"I do, indeed, have one or two things to accomplish against which your charming naked self would provide a distraction."

"Yeah, I bet you have."

"As I said."

“One or two things to accomplish,” repeats Will in a good approximation of Hannibal’s accent before reverting to his normal voice. “You’re so *shifty*.”

“Me?” says Hannibal innocently.

“Why won’t you tell me what you’re doing?”

“Because it is not particularly interesting. I shall tell you another time if it concerns you so much, but not now. Get some rest Will, you look exhausted.”

Will obligingly crawls into the bed and pulls the covers over his head, before seeming to have a change of heart and abruptly remerging and grabbing hold of Hannibal’s wrist. Hannibal glances down at it in vague surprise. “Stay a bit longer,” says Will earnestly. “Please.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just…I feel a bit weird. I could use some company.”

“Go to sleep and you won't know I am gone.”

“I would. I sleep better when you're here.”

“Dearest Will.”

“No it’s fine,” says Will, suddenly self-conscious. “I’m being stupid, I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“Nothing is the matter with you.”

“I suppose. Just tired.”

“Well then. Besides you look half asleep already. You need some proper rest – not least because I intend to join you up here as soon as I am free in order to wear you out for a second time.”

“Oh yes?”

“Certainly yes. The washstand, for example, is precisely the right height to bend you over.”

“You’re such a reprobate,” says Will, who’s started to smile again. “I’m going to tell Mr Crawford to find me a nanny who doesn’t bend me over washstands.”

“You are quite right – it is a terrible scandal.”

“A *washstand*,” says Will. “You really are a reprobate. How have you managed to keep it hidden all these years?”

“You’d be surprised,” replies Hannibal smoothly.

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Once Will has fallen asleep Hannibal permits himself a few luxurious moments of simply watching him before slipping silently downstairs. Once there he gathers his coat and hat and is just moving towards the consulting room to assemble a few final items when he's disturbed by a knock at the front door. The knock is loud and peremptory; *demanding*, almost – if a banging noise could be said to possess such human qualities, then this is undoubtedly a good candidate – and Hannibal makes an impatient sound at the inevitable delay that whoever is responsible for it is going to cause. Then he contemplates calling out to Mary to ignore it when a second knock at the consulting room door indicates that it's too late and whoever it is has already been admitted.

"Yes," says Hannibal with the smallest hint of irritation.

"Good evening sir," replies Mary. "Terribly sorry to disturb you."

"Please don't apologise. You yourself are not disturbing me." Hannibal pauses and then can't help adding, rather waspishly: "Unlike the person who took it upon themselves to call round at this hour uninvited."

"It's Dr Frederick Chilton sir. I'll tell him you're not at home, shall I?"

At this point even Hannibal, with all his preternatural levels of self-composure, finds it difficult not to display any indication of what a *very* surprising coincidence this is. However he recovers himself almost immediately and gives a languid wave of the hand before answering: "No, if he is already here I suppose I should see him. Please be so good as to show him in."

"Certainly sir," replies Mary, retreating back towards the corridor.

"So Dr Chilton, here we are," murmurs Hannibal sardonically after she's left. "And with such a little web it seems I can ensnare so large a fly as you." With extreme speed he goes to his desk and retrieves a glass phial which he stows away in his pocket, then arranges himself in a chair by the fireplace and picks up a book – just as Dr Chilton swoops in a few seconds later.

"Good evening Frederick," says Hannibal in a leisurely voice. "What a fortunate coincidence. I had been hoping to speak with you myself, yet here you have been obliging enough to come to me."

Dr Chilton looks distinctly put out at this, as if he considers it well beneath his dignity to oblige anyone. "Oh?" he replies, rather sulkily. "What did you want to see me about?"

"You first, Frederick. I insist."

"Very well," says Dr Chilton, slightly mollified.

"Although let me offer you a drink beforehand. Wine? Brandy?"

"I wouldn't say no to a glass of port if you have any."

"Of course. *Messias*?"

“Well, that would be very agreeable,” says Dr Chilton, cheering up even further. He settles himself into the larger of the two chairs and positions it a little closer to the fire, completely oblivious to the way Hannibal has angled himself away from view as he prepares the drinks.

If Hannibal, in turn, is displeased to come back and find Dr Chilton sitting in his chair he has too much self-control to show it. Instead he hands over the glass and then coils himself into the opposite seat before adding: “Perhaps a toast is in order.”

“If you like. What shall we drink to?”

“To cooperation,” says Hannibal. He inclines his glass in Dr Chilton’s direction and takes a sip before leaning back with one of his most inscrutable smiles.

“A good choice, I must say,” observes Dr Chilton. “Considering my purpose for coming here.”

Hannibal raises a single eyebrow and then regards his wine meditatively, admiring the tawny hues and tints, before adding: “Mr Graham I suppose?” For a few seconds Dr Chilton looks distinctly caught off guard, mouthing like a fish on a line. “Please,” says Hannibal, “do continue.”

“How did you…” begins Dr Chilton, unable to contain himself. Hannibal’s politely interested smile doesn’t waver and Dr Chilton clears his throat before adding in a more composed voice: “Well, alright then. Now look here, I know perfectly well that he’s staying with you.”

“Of course you do,” replies Hannibal without missing a beat. “It is hardly a secret – Jack Crawford is also aware. Mr Graham is currently without accommodation and I am very happy to put a roof over his head until such times he can arrange somewhere else.”

Dr Chilton, who’d been counting on dramatically exposing this knowledge with all the flourish of a conjurer pulling a rabbit from a hat (and had even been rehearsing The Moment of Truth in the cab on the way over) is tremendously disappointed by such a calm confirmation. In turn he’s too proud to admit that he paid to have Will followed in order to find it out, and opts for a suggestive silence instead to try and imply that he’s privy to all Jack Crawford’s professional secrets. Then he makes a visible effort to rally himself and asks: “Well can I see him?”

“No,” says Hannibal.

Dr Chilton waits expectantly for some kind of clarification, and when none is forthcoming snaps: “Why not?”

“He is asleep,” replies Hannibal tenderly.

“Asleep! At this hour! Whatever for?”

“He has been seriously ill. He grows tired easily.” Hannibal takes another sip of his wine and permits himself a serene smile at the memory of all the various interesting ways of making Will tired.

Dr Chilton, unimpressed by this, drums his fingers impatiently on the armrest of his chair. “In that case I’m going to ask you a question; and I want you to be honest with me.”

“Y-e-s,” says Hannibal.

“Are you studying him?”

“Studying Mr Graham?” repeats Hannibal, feigning incomprehension.

“Yes. *Studying* him.”

“Me?” says Hannibal, opening his dark eyes very wide. “*Study* Mr Graham?”

“Are you planning to publish monographs of any kind? A case report? Anything like that?”

“Oh I *see*,” replies Hannibal. “No, not at all. Of course I don’t deny he would make a rather fascinating subject, but it would hardly be possible to do such a thing without his permission. And it is not the kind of enterprise for which permission would ever be granted.”

Dr Chilton nods firmly, satisfied with this response. “Maybe not in his *current* circumstances,” he adds after a suggestive little pause. “But if he were somewhere else entirely. An inmate at my asylum for example…” He leans forward in his chair, fixing Hannibal with what he considers to be a glance of profound intrigue and subtlety. “Just consider – for example – if another physician were to agree with me that he would be better off being placed under medical custody; that *everyone* would be better off. And consider if, once he’d been committed, myself and the other physician decided to collaborate on a series of publications about his psychological state. Imagine the renown they would attract: a completely unique and novel case study, unparalleled in the annals of medicine.”

A small pause follows this speech and then: “Are you quite well Frederick?” says Hannibal softly. “You seem a little pale.”

“I’m fine…fine. Mr Graham though; Mr Graham is not *fine*. I’m certain he had something to do with that journalist’s death – and what’s more, I don’t expect Jack Crawford would take anywhere near as much convincing this time round. Jack knows that…he knows…”

“You really don’t appear quite yourself Frederick,” repeats Hannibal rhythmically. “Perhaps the wine has gone to your head?”

“I’m fine I tell you,” snaps Dr Chilton petulantly. “Or at least…perhaps a glass of water.”

“Too much wine on an empty stomach can have all manner of strange effects,” says Hannibal in a calm voice, tilting his head slightly to one side as he watches Dr Chilton begin to slump down into his chair. “Just stay where you are Frederick. I’m sure you’ll start to feel better before *too* much longer.”

*****

Will is so exhausted that he ends up sleeping straight through the night, jolting violently awake around seven o’clock consumed by a sense of fear and agitation. He takes a few deep

breaths, trying to coax himself back into calmness, then automatically reaches out for Hannibal only to find that his side of the bed is empty – and, judging from the coolness of the sheets – has been so for some time. Will is disappointed by this, feeling in need of a bit of tenderness and reassurance (*Oh God*, thinks Will in disgust. *I need a hug don't I? Christ*), so resolves to go and find him and demand comfort (possibly hugs) belatedly. Considering this is the first morning for a while that he doesn't have to dash off to Scotland Yard he'd really have preferred to spend it lolling around in a house coat but can't face the idea of appearing like that in case one of the servants sees him, so arduously pulls on his clothes, tries to do something with his hair (which is sticking out at improbably mad angles that defy the known laws of physics) and then sets off in search of Hannibal.

In the end this doesn't take long, because he's in the first place Will looks: propped up in the usual chair in the consulting room and taking sips from a teacup with one hand while scanning through a stack of letters with the other. "Good morning Will," he says without glancing up.

Even though he's entered completely silently, Will is grudgingly accepting the reality of being *smelled* before he's seen as a matter of course, so merely rolls his eyes and asks Hannibal what he's been doing all morning.

"I have not been to bed," replies Hannibal, who's still frowning over one of the letters.

"Why not? And aren't you exhausted?"

"Not at the moment. I shall probably require some rest by the afternoon."

"You mean you'll need a *nap*," says Will, slightly maliciously.

"Certainly not," replies Hannibal with dignity. "I do not *nap.*"

"I bet you do this afternoon," says Will, although he's no longer paying full attention because his sharp eyes have immediately noticed the pair of wine glasses on the desk. "Who was here last night?"

"Someone who became very drunk and required escorting home," replies Hannibal casually. "And the reason I had no opportunity to go to bed."

"It was Dr Chilton wasn't it?" adds Will accusingly, having also spotted a familiar bit of scarlet silk down the side of the chair. "That's his hideous cravat – he was wearing it at the meeting yesterday."

"How alarmingly perceptive you are Will," says Hannibal in the same casual voice.

"So are you going to tell me why you were sat here all night getting drunk with Dr Ass Hat?"

Hannibal finally smiles at this and puts down the letters. "There is not really anything to tell. He called round to discuss a few matters relating to the investigation and enjoyed a bit too much port wine in the process. I ended up having to put him in a carriage and accompany him home, where no doubt he shall be awaking this morning in a state of profound

embarrassment." Very neatly he flicks one of the letters over Dr Chilton's house keys before Will can see them. "Be reasonable; I could hardly have thrown him out into the street."

"No, you could have thrown him into the Thames instead. In a sack. With bricks at the bottom."

Hannibal's smile grows fractionally broader. "As tedious as he is there is such a thing as professional courtesy."

"Bullshit," says Will firmly, leaning over to steal some of Hannibal's tea. "There's something going on between the two of you. He kept trying to catch your eye all through yesterday's meeting."

"So you noticed that too did you?" replies Hannibal in a fond voice. "Very well. Although if I tell you I don't want you to become…agitated."

"What?" asks Will guardedly, before taking advantage of Hannibal's inattention to steal some of the toast as well.

"The truth is that he remains very eager to acquire you and sees me as a likely confederate to arrange a forced committal."

"Jesus," says Will, choking on his tea. "*Really*?"

"Really. Of course he is wasting his time, but as I see it the arrangement is rather a useful one. It means I remain fully aware of his plans and can overturn them without him even realising it. I am the proverbial Trojan Horse in the enemy camp." Hannibal smirks slightly. "And in my capacity as Trojan Horse, I can reassure you that you have *nothing* to be concerned about."

"Yes, but…"

"Nothing, Will. Now I must insist we change the subject – I have already suffered through an entire evening of Dr Chilton's idiocies and reliving them all over again in retrospect may prove fatal to my health." Will scowls mutinously and Hannibal begins to smile. "Come here."

"No," says Will. "I'm not a dog."

"Certainly you are not."

"Although speaking of which," says Will, cheering up slightly. "Could I keep a dog here?"

"A *dog*?" repeats Hannibal with a slightly pained expression.

"Yes. You know – a dog. *Canis familiaris*. Furry quadruped. Goes…" Will opens his mouth then changes his mind at the last minute on the grounds that doing a dog impression is something he might subsequently have cause to regret. "It *barks*," says Will.

"Hmm. Sarcasm."

“And the assorted characteristics of man’s best friend mean I can’t have one in a boarding house. So – could I keep one here?”

“I would rather you kept yourself here.”

Up until this point Will has been tracing a pattern on the rug with his foot, and at the sound of the words he goes totally still before renewing the movement must faster than before. “I can’t live with you,” he finally says without raising his head. “You know I can’t.”

“I don’t see why not. You are here all the time anyway.”

“Because people would *talk*,” says Will gloomily. “People at Scotland Yard.”

“Very possibly. What does it matter?”

“Of course it matters.”

“It does not. Besides it wouldn’t inevitably draw notice; the cost of living in London is so absurdly high that many unmarried men share accommodation.” Hannibal smirks slightly. “Look at Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. A detective and a doctor in fact: a singularly appropriate combination.”

“They’re not *real*,” snaps Will, irritable because he’s longing to agree and is ashamed of the reservation that’s holding him back. He can’t help it though, because surely the gamble is far too high? It’s all right for Hannibal, with all his security of aristocratic privilege and self-determination, to assume they can just do whatever they like with no consequences; this is one area in which Will, who’s had a lifetime of witnessing injustice and intolerance – not to mention being consistently denied the things he wants – feels he’s in a better position to judge. *You’re too important to me*, he wants to say. *I can’t do anything to risk you; I’d rather see you less if it meant protecting what we have*. Not to mention the fact, inevitable yet unspoken, that one day he’s going to have to return to America. Will sighs unhappily, opens his mouth and then closes it again.

“You would have your own room of course,” continues Hannibal. “And not merely for appearances sake – I think it would be important for you to have your own private space. There are several you could choose from; you could have it redecorated too if you wish. Although I would like you to sleep with me at least a few nights a week.”

“I’d want that too,” says Will quickly.

“So are you agreeing?”

Will glances up again then gazes forlornly at Hannibal for a few seconds without speaking. “Well at least let me take you abroad in the spring,” says Hannibal, tactfully changing the subject. “You said you had never been to mainland Europe; there are so many things I would like to show you.” He smiles beatifically. “And then it would not matter if people talked because you could not understand what they were saying.”

“You’re not funny,” says Will before adding, more wistfully: “Thank you though, it would have been wonderful. But I can’t possibly leave London while the investigation’s ongoing.”

“Hmm, very true. In my eagerness to whisk you away I am forgetting the practicalities. Well, in the interim I have decided to hold another dinner party and I should very much like you to attend this time. I want to show you off.” Will raises his eyebrows sceptically. “Well naturally I do. You are by far the loveliest thing in the house.”

“But no one knows…” Will falters, unable to bring himself to say ‘that I belong to you’ even though it's essentially true. “That I’m staying here,” he eventually adds, a bit lamely. “With you. That I'm here with you.”

“What difference does that make? *I* know and that is more than sufficient.” Hannibal pauses, then adds with a small quirk of the mouth: “You would be surprised how much satisfaction can be derived simply from relishing something of which no one else is aware.”

“You really want me to go?” asks Will, gloomy at the idea of the social agonies it’s going to entail.

“I do.”

“Well, okay then,” says Will with a heroic level of effort.

“Excellent,” replies Hannibal smoothly. “I intend to invite a number of our Scotland Yard colleagues as well.”

“You’re *not*?” asks Will in horror.

“Certainly I am.” Hannibal gives a long, slow smile. “Trust me, Will. I think it should make for a rather interesting evening.”

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Any hopes Will has that the dinner party might be postponed to the indefinite future are firmly scuppered later that morning when he wanders into the consulting room to find that Hannibal has not only drawn up a list of suitable guests but has written and despatched invitations for them as well. Having completed that task he then produces a sheet of foolscap paper and begins the process of drafting a seating plan; which takes far longer than it should due to the constant amendments required by Will peering over his shoulder at intervals and saying “I’m not sitting next to that bastard.”

“I could put you next to me. But it would imply you were the guest of honour and I suppose you would not like that either?”

“God, no, don’t do that. Stick me at the end.”

“I shall place you in the middle where I can look at you.”

“If you *must*,” replies Will in a martyred tone. “Have you decided on a menu?”

“I was considering a French theme. There are so many possibilities, and I should like an excuse to try *bourride*.”

“What’s that?”

“A type of stew I recently discovered; a Provençal variant of *bouillabaisse*.” Will looks nonplussed. “Although it really ought to include squid and it's impossible to get at this time of year. I suppose one might use additional shellfish…I shall have to go to Billingsgate and see what’s available.”

“Oh, I see – an exchange,” says Will. “Squid pro quo.”

“Do be quiet you little horror.”

Will smirks to himself then stands behind Hannibal and begins to fold a concertina shape into the collar of his jacket. “You are clearly determined to torment me today,” says Hannibal without looking round.

“Speaking of torment, you do realise I’ll have to hire some evening wear again? How are you going to bear it?”

“Ah yes,” says Hannibal. “About that.” He finally puts his pen down then turns round and takes hold of Will’s hands. “You were so adamant before that you didn’t want me to buy you anything, but I would be very happy if you can lift the ban and allow me to have you a suit made. It’s really no trouble – and would give me a great amount of pleasure.”

Will goes quiet at this and then shuffles awkwardly, finding it hard to formulate a suitable response. On one hand Hannibal is clearly longing to go ahead with the scheme and Will doesn't want to deny him the satisfaction, but equally he can't really bear the idea of being dressed up as if he's some kind of…what? (The word *courtesan* comes veering unhelpfully to mind and Will gives a small shudder and pushes it away again). Nevertheless, having clothes bought for him seems a bit much. It was different with the coat and scarf because they were second hand; even the tie pin, while admittedly far more magnificent, somehow seems less invasive than being expected to wear an entire outfit that’s been curated to someone else’s taste. Then he takes another look at Hannibal’s expression, which he manages to persuade himself is one of serene hopefulness, and immediately feels his resolve starting to crumble. It’s only a single suit after all; it’s not as if he’s going to have to wear it all the time.

“All right then,” he finally says, trying to sound enthusiastic. “That’s very generous, thank you.” Upon which Hannibal looks so delighted that Will immediately feels guilty for saying no for so long.

In order for the clothes to be ready on time Hannibal insists on taking Will to see his tailor that same afternoon; which promptly sends Will into further agonies of writhing embarrassment because having only ever purchased mass-produced clothes from sundry department stores he’d forgotten that this will involve having to stand in a shop (no doubt on top of a stool or something equally appalling) and be *measured*. “You seem to think I am taking you to be flayed,” says Hannibal in amusement.

“It’s not that,” replies Will defensively (even though it is – partly). “It’s how it’s going to *look*. I mean I’m younger than you, and I’m obviously…” He hesitates for a few seconds, unable to bring himself to say ‘your social inferior.’ “I’m obviously not as wealthy.”

“And?”

“*And*.” Will scowls, convinced that Hannibal is entirely aware of what his reservations are and is feigning obliviousness just to be a dick about it. “The tailor’s probably going to think that I’m your…”

“My what?” asks Hannibal innocently.

“That I’m your *rent boy*,” says Will irritably and, regrettably, rather loudly; to the extent that two passers-by turn round and stare at him in disbelief. One of them, an elderly man in a shiny top hat, is bristling with so much outraged disapproval that his moustache is practically standing on end. Will briefly catches his eye and is torn between a surreally conflicted urge to blushingly and ardently apologise versus a desire to lean right into the old bastard’s face and emphatically hiss: ‘Hell yeah, that’s right granddad – *rent boy*.’

“I can guarantee that he is not going to think anything,” replies Hannibal in an irritatingly calm voice. “The firm is a very reputable and well-established one; which in layman’s terms means that as long as he is receiving a large payment for his services then his discretion is guaranteed.”

“Well what if he’s got some misplaced sense of moral outrage?”

“Morality has nothing to do with it – it is simply about money.”

Will now makes a rather mutinous growling noise at what he perceives to be the extreme unlikeliness of this. Nevertheless in the end Hannibal is proven entirely correct and if the tailor finds anything unusual about the commission he gives no indication; instead being a model of professional courtesy and moderation and even blinking benignly and inspecting his tape measure when Hannibal puts a casual hand on Will’s shoulder and rubs the back of his neck with his thumb. Will can’t summon enough intelligent interest to express a preference over the cut or type of material, so leaves the tailor and Hannibal to confer between themselves and instead entertains himself with taking in the almost absurdly opulent surroundings and accepting glasses of wine and dainty plates of *petits fours* that are offered at intervals by an assistant who manifests all the same deference as the tailor. Will supposes that if he was living with Hannibal then he could expect this kind of treatment all the time (namely being grovelled to by a minion in a powdered wig whilst guzzling cream cakes and sitting on a velvet *pouffle*…for God’s sake). Nevertheless the reflection brings with it a twinge of discomfort that, while admittedly less serious than this morning’s fears, is still enough to catch at his consciousness: which is simply the *passiveness* of it. Will has always been fiercely and proudly independent and there’s an inherent inequality in the situation which bothers him; offering sex and companionship in lieu of any meaningful financial or practical contribution. In fact it’s unpleasantly reminiscent of an expression that occasionally crops up in the more lurid, sensationalist novels – the type which inevitably get banned and inspire self-righteous letters to the newspapers – which refer to men ‘keeping’ a mistress. *A kept woman*: decorative and permanently available, whose lavish lifestyle is maintained by a

wealthy lover. Will frowns to himself mulling over the implications of this. Does that make him the male equivalent (a mister? A master?)…and isn't there a good chance that Hannibal is going to grow bored and irritated with such an arrangement? He might be enamoured of Will *now*, but what about in a few months' time when the novelty has thoroughly worn off? Because what if it *does*? Will bites fretfully on his thumbnail then glances up and sees Hannibal gazing at him rather fixedly; so he forces himself to smile and, in doing so, push the worry to the back of his mind until a more convenient moment arises to take it out and inspect it again.

In the end the measuring doesn't take too long and Will can't help noticing, and being secretly entertained by, the way Hannibal's eyes narrow very slightly each time the tailor runs his hands over Will's body despite the fact it's entirely necessary and completely non-invasive. "Yes, I think that should do very well," says the latter when he's jotted down the last set of figures in a flowing copperplate hand. "Thank you sir," (even though Will hasn't done anything beyond standing on a stool with an expression more suitable for a martyr lashed to a stake) and then to Hannibal: "Sir wishes it to be ready for Friday?"

"That would be perfect."

"Very good sir," says the tailor politely then gives Hannibal an elegant little bow (who nods in response) and then a matching one at Will (who longs to tell him not to bother, because – seriously) and then the whole ordeal is over and Will can dive into his jacket again, and then into his coat, and then practically run out the shop and all the way down Bond Street. In fact the whole tailoring experience has been something of an ordeal – although the cream cakes and grovelling were pretty enjoyable – and he's hoping to go and catch a few hours' sleep back at the house, only to be foiled in this ambition by Hannibal insisting on a detour to Brompton Road in order to visit Harrods and get provisions for the dinner party. Which means Will has to suffer all over again by being surrounded by people who are not just well-off but *rich*. Given that he's repeatedly stood there with his slight five foot nine inch frame and glared down the criminally-minded of every possible variation of viciousness and depravity, the fact that he's now being overwhelmed by wealthy Londoners is rather ludicrous and the irony of it isn't lost on him. Nevertheless there's no denying the fact that he feels distinctly out of his depth. Rather incredulously he thinks back to the general store in his own home town, with the battered wooden counter and permanent smell of cornmeal and damp rubber, and how the contrast to this is so marked that it might have been a creation from the hands of a whole different species.

Hannibal orders the items he wants from the grocery hall (while Will surreptitiously eyes the cream cakes and wonders if he's developing some kind of worrying dairy-based pastry fetish) then arranges for them to be delivered to Harley Street before lingering for a while in the homeware department to see if any *objet d'art* happen to be of interest. Will can feel himself growing dizzily cross-eyed from such a glut of luxurious items, although Hannibal is mercifully brief in his deliberations and quickly selects a rather beautiful Haviland china vase: meticulously painted with a Roman-inspired scene of graceful nymph-like women in flowing togas surrounding a striking figure whose head, wreathed in laurel leaves, has two faces staring in opposite directions.

"Janus," says Hannibal in explanation.

“Oh yes,” replies Will, dredging up the fragments a long-forgotten history class. “He’s meant to be looking into the future and past simultaneously isn’t he?”

“Correct,” says Hannibal, staring at Will with a rather indecipherable expression. “The Roman god of transitions and beginnings.” Then he smiles slightly, suddenly casual again. “And doubtless very apt for myself.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. When the situation demands it I am capable, on occasion, of being rather two-faced.”

Although it’s such a striking face, thinks Will rather dreamily as they’re leaving, that you didn’t really mind there being two of them.

*****

On returning to Harley Street Will collapses on the sofa and dozes for a while with his head on Hannibal’s knee before getting up again at six o’clock to prepare for his first night’s surveillance in Whitechapel. Mindful of the others’ intention to disguise themselves he briefly considers trying to look more dissipated – tattered clothes, for example, or putting some oil in his hair to make it appear unwashed – but ultimately decides against it. Partly because it seems enormously patronising to dress up and play-act at being deprived, but also (which is unsettling but undeniably true) because the whole point of him being there is *not* to blend in. So in the end he just wears his normal clothes then checks and re-checks his coat pocket for the reassuring presence of the revolver.

“Nervous?” asks Hannibal with interest.

“Yes,” replies Will bluntly. “I’d have to be stupid not to be – the guy’s a total maniac.”

“It shall be very interesting to see what transpires.”

This is said in such a thoughtful tone that Will immediately glances up and gives Hannibal a quick look. “You’re not planning to come are you?” he says sharply.

“I am not. After Jack Crawford was so strongly opposed it would draw unnecessary attention. Besides, it’s hardly as if you need me to be there; you are more than capable of taking care of yourself.” Hannibal pauses and gives a faint smile. “Although that’s not to say I wouldn’t have relished the opportunity to see you in action.”

“Well you can’t,” replies Will firmly. “It would look odd if someone saw us together – people might suspect. And more to the point it could be *dangerous*. I know you can handle yourself,” he adds hastily, as memories of the calm way Hannibal despatched the ostler come veering to mind, “but this is another level entirely. Something might happen to you. You could end up out of your depth.”

“Imagine that,” says Hannibal serenely.

“And don’t forget the other one’s still out there as well.” Remembering the context in which this was last mentioned, Will flushes slightly before busying himself with knotting his scarf.

“God knows if anything’ll ever be done around that. Mr Crawford keeps shutting me down now whenever I mention the cannibalism link – he was on the verge of accepting it before I was ill, but now he’s making it clear he doesn’t want to know. I bet Dr Chilton’s said something to him.”

“Possibly. Although I suppose his reluctance, while not excusable, is understandable. Jack Crawford, that is – he has enough to deal with in countenancing Jack the Ripper.” Will makes an irritated huffing noise and Hannibal uncoils himself from his chair and prowls over in order to finish tying the scarf in place. “Wake me when you return, won’t you?”

“Are you sure? I could be late; I probably will be.” Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “Okay, yes, I’ll wake you.”

“Be sure that you do,” replies Hannibal. He puts his hand on the small of Will’s back then escorts him to the front door and waves him off into the fog; a slow inscrutable smile on his face which, like the Cheshire Cat, lingers on in a vaguely unsettling way even after he’s disappeared back into the house.

Will meets Jack and the others as planned in Scotland Yard and after exchanging the usual round of formalities they band together and begin the 40 minute trudge to Whitechapel. The sun has long since set and darkness now smothers everything with the same viscous quality as tar. Even the faint freckling of stars are obscured by the fog and everyone’s breath is hovering in a series of frozen puffs as if their heads are starting to smoulder. “Wretched night isn’t it?” observes Jack.

“Very,” says Will, who’s not fully listening because he’s so struck by how London is mutating as they migrate further east: like a slowly decaying limb that appears healthy on first inspection until the bandage is pulled down and the stench of gangrene becomes apparent. The gleaming shop fronts and clean streets of Westminster are gradually giving over to blasted tenement buildings and reeking heaps of straw and sewage: where there are no street lamps and no paving stones – and no hope and no prospects – and where the only establishments that seem to be thriving are the greasy, heaving din of the gin parlours. A pile of putrid rags abruptly rears into life as they walk past the Whitechapel Hospital and transforms itself into an elderly beggar who stares at them with cloudy eyes and a toothless mouth, and whose face is disfigured by a number of fleshy growths that compete to jostle his features out of place. “Any money to spare for the homeless?” he chants at them. “Any money sirs? Any money to spare?”

“Leave it,” hisses Jack as Will reaches into his pocket. “The first sign of cash and we’ll be inundated.” Then he sees Will’s face and adds in a softer tone: “Give a donation to the East End Mission if you’re concerned. They do good work and the money will go a lot further – that old man’ll just take it to the nearest gin shop.”

“Well to be fair sir, what else is he supposed to do with it?” says Will sharply. “Save up and buy a house?” When Jack’s not looking he definitely flips a coin into the pile of rags then allows himself to be chivvied into the centre of a miserable-looking square that he supposes must function as some kind of community gathering place. It’s surrounded by a series of squalid looking shops on all four sides, interspersed with the inevitable public houses and gin bars, and the air is ringing with loud voices, shouts, curses and even the occasional shriek;

although whether the source of the latter is from anger, fear, or even mirth is impossible to tell as the sounds blend into each other in a kind of nightmarish cacophony of human desperation. Down a side street *The Ten Bells* is clearly visible, and the sight of it makes Will give an involuntary shiver – a visceral reminder that now they really are in the centre of the Ripper's hunting ground. Unbidden, the words from the letter begin to echo through his mind: *Catch me when you can Mister Graham. From hell. From hell. From hell.*

"So now what?" he says out loud to Jack.

"Now – we wait," Jack replies. "Gentleman: same formation as previous nights. Dr Price, Mr Zeller – to the east side, Inspectors Brent and Turner to the west. Sergeant Matthews: you and Sergeants Bates, Jones and Forrest patrol around the periphery and report back if you see anything suspicious. Mr Graham: you stay here with me where you're clearly on view."

"Sir," says Will mechanically. He follows to where Jack is gesturing – a stone plinth in the centre of the square that was probably once a monument of some kind but is now so blemished and eroded as to be unidentifiable – then props himself against it and tips his hat a little further off his forehead so his face is clearly visible. Jack leans next to him and rummages in his pocket for a bottle of brandy before offering it to Will.

"I was going to bring a flask," he adds, slightly defensively, "but no one uses those round here. It would have looked too conspicuous."

Will agrees that it would and then gratefully takes a swig, hoping it might help insulate against the gnawing cold. Across the square the prostitutes have already assembled and are clearly identifiable: huddled together beneath a crumbling brick archway and, despite the frigid temperature, deliberately displaying bare necks, naked arms, and dresses cut low across the chest. Will sighs in sympathy and wishes he could offer them his jacket.

"Depressing isn't it," says Jack unnecessarily.

Will nods gloomily and then stamps his feet, trying to coax a bit of warmth into them. Jack's warning not to let his guard down is forefront in his mind, but as the minutes turn into hours and limp past with no sign of disturbance he finds it increasingly hard to maintain any meaningful level of alertness. In this respect Will realises that while he'd been prepared for fear and unease and a measure of physical discomfort, what he hadn't fully anticipated – somewhat unrealistically, all things considered – was just how boring it was going to be. Across the street the prostitutes are disappearing into the alleyways at intervals, appearing some time later straightening their clothes and exchanging whispered remarks with the others.

"I feel for them," observes Jack, gesturing towards the woman. "The Chief Superintendent – and many others, it has to be said – are of the opinion it's their own fault for putting themselves in harm's way; but you'd hardly earn your living like that if you had another choice. Admittedly this madman's raised the stakes but violence against prostitutes is endemic."

"Because they're so vulnerable," says Will, remembering Margot's words. "Not only are they physically unsafe, but even when something happens people aren't inclined to take them

seriously. Or, as you say, blame them for their own assaults." He's carefully watching the way the women are arranging their transactions, noting that while men occasionally approach them first they initiate contact themselves in a substantial number of cases. It's entirely consistent with Hannibal's original hypothesis – sat in his kitchen on that first memorable evening – that the Ripper is dependent on the women being easily accessible because he believes he doesn't have the social skills to convince them to accompany him.

"It's like a nightmare," Jack is now saying. "No one really has the first clue how to tackle it, including myself."

"It's not your fault sir. None of you have ever seen anything like this before."

"That's just it," says Jack, almost gratefully. "We're having to invent the rules for the investigation as we go along. It's like those explorers one's always reading about in the papers, going after the source of the Nile or what have you. The difference is that they *chose* to make the expedition; I didn't. None of us did. I wish the newspapers would take that into account before lambasting us for doing a terrible job."

Will nods sympathetically then jumps in spite of himself as someone yells "Sir! Sir! Mr Crawford!" virtually straight into his ear.

"What is it Sergeant Matthews?" snaps Jack. "And for Heaven's sake, lower your voice."

"Sir, we think we've just seen *Dr Chilton*," announces the latter, who looks as if he's about to burst with excitement.

"Nonsense! You couldn't possibly."

"I'd swear to it sir, and so would Sergeant Bates. He was coming out of *The Ten Bells*. He had a big hat on but you could tell it was him."

"Rubbish," replies Jack firmly. "I gave Dr Chilton very clear instructions and he's hardly likely to disobey them. Besides, even if it *was* him – and I'm not saying it is – you're not here to conduct surveillance of our own task force, you're here to ascertain signs of Jack the Ripper. What are you here to do Sergeant Matthews?"

"Look for Jack the Ripper sir."

"And are you currently doing that Sergeant? Or are you stood in the middle of Whitechapel pestering me with ridiculous stories about Dr Chilton incognito in *The Ten Bells* while treading all over Mr Graham's feet?"

"Oh yes, terribly sorry Mr Graham. I thought it was a bit of cobblestone."

"It's fine."

"Sergeant Matthews," says Jack in a warning voice. "You're still here."

"Yes sir. I mean no sir. I mean I'll be leaving now sir."

“Honestly!” snorts Jack when Sergeant Matthews has retreated. “Dr Chilton indeed.”

“It doesn’t seem very likely,” replies Will; although somewhat absent-mindedly, because the term ‘doctor,’ coupled with the sight of the women’s bare arms and necks, has abruptly caused something to slot into place and an idea has just occurred to him. He turns round now to Jack, all thoughts of Dr Chilton forgotten. “Look, Mr Crawford, we know the Ripper’s not an actual medical practitioner?”

“Well…there still isn’t a consensus. Although I know you and Drs Price and Lecter say as much.”

“No medical knowledge,” repeats Will firmly. “And yet he has a degree of *anatomical* knowledge. More to the point, he has an obvious – and highly perverse – fascination with the human body. He wouldn’t mutilate the victims like that if he didn’t.”

“Yes. So? What’s your point?”

Will takes a deep breath. “My point…my point is that *I think I know a way of making him come to us*.”

Jack raises his eyebrows and then leans in slightly towards Will. “Go on.”

“I admit it’s a long shot,” says Will slowly. “A very long shot; although probably no more than standing round like this night after night. But the thing is sir: this whole case has been woven in with the media from the beginning. So I’m proposing that this time we make it work for us; and we post an invitation that – hopefully – Jack the Ripper is going to find it impossible to resist.”

*****

Will returns to Harley Street in the early hours of the morning, caught in an unpleasant liminal space of complete exhaustion tempered by anxious wakefulness, and is touched to find Hannibal reading in front of the fireplace and obviously waiting up for him.

“Nothing of note?” says Hannibal taking one look at Will’s face.

“Nothing at all.” Will takes off his hat and perches it on the plaster bust of Socrates that’s kept on the desk then collapses in front of Hannibal’s chair as a silent indication that he wants a massage. “To all intents and purposes it was a complete waste of time. And then I have to go and do it all over again tomorrow.”

“You need to be patient,” says Hannibal, obediently beginning to rub Will’s shoulders. “He is hardly going to announce himself to oblige you and Jack Crawford. When he makes himself known to you it will be on his own terms.”

“Hmm.”

“This is a waiting game.”

“I know, Mr Crawford said something similar. Although it’s an odd sort of game.”

“Cat-and-mouse,” replies Hannibal idly.

“Hunter and hunted,” acknowledges Will. “The trick is to make sure he lets himself believe he has one role when in reality it’s the other. Ow. *Ow*. That hurts.”

“My apologies. Your muscles are very tense.”

“To the left a bit – no further down. Thanks. Speaking of the former, Mr Crawford’s given me a gun.”

“Has he? May I see?”

Will rummages in his pocket for it and reaches behind his head to pass it over before leaning forwards again. “You have ammunition?” asks Hannibal after he’s inspected it. “The barrel does not hold many rounds.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep it in the sideboard if you don’t mind.” Will yawns and stretches slightly, forgetting about the gun. “You might as well go to bed,” he adds after a few more minutes have passed. “It’s late and I know you’ve got patients tomorrow.”

“You are not coming yourself?”

“Soon,” says Will absently.

Hannibal strokes Will’s neck and then gently moves him out the way and stands up. “Don’t be too long,” he says. “You need some rest.”

Will nods in response then watches Hannibal disappear upstairs before taking off his coat and boots and slinging himself over the sofa so he can stare at the ceiling. Silently he turns his plan over in his mind, critically examining it from all angles to try and find the weak points, before sleep finally overtakes him and he drifts off with one arm flung over his face and his feet hanging off the edge of the sofa. Unfortunately the impressions of the past few days refuse to fade away, and in consequence the sleep is neither restful nor restorative but jagged, fearsome and full of terrifying images – and he eventually wakes up screaming in a pitch black room where the fire’s burned itself out and the only illumination is the ghostly silver gleam from the moon. For a few seconds Will lies prone, listening to his ragged panting breath and beset by a plunge of unease that’s so acute it’s almost physically painful, before tipping himself off the sofa and stumbling upstairs; desperate to find Hannibal and be reassured and comforted. The darkness in the bedroom is so complete that for a few seconds Will loses his bearings completely and can’t even work out where the bed is before Hannibal’s voice says: “Will? What is it” from out of the blackness.

Some part of Will’s mind registers the slight eeriness of this – that despite the lateness and darkness Hannibal still sounds completely alert and in control – but he’s too overwhelmed to really care and simply follows the sound instead until his legs hit the bedframe and he can climb in and bury his face in Hannibal’s neck while clawing rather frantically at his back and shoulders. In fact it begins to occur to Will that he’s actually slightly hysterical, although somehow the desire to vent the tension is greater than taking the trouble of controlling himself.

“What is the matter Will?” repeats Hannibal in the same calm voice. “What do you want?” He gently unhooks Will’s hands from where they’re practically pinned round his neck and kisses Will’s forehead. “Do you need something? Do you want me to make love to you?”

Will doesn’t reply and instead renews his grip round Hannibal’s shoulders, scrabbling with clawed fingers and then clinging on with such grim determination that Hannibal finally takes hold of Will’s arms and then neatly flips him round and pushes him onto his back. It’s done so deftly – almost leisurely – yet despite the casualness, still serves as a reminder of how abnormally strong Hannibal actually is. Hints of this come out every now and then, almost as if by accident, and while Will generally finds it reassuring (and, if he’s totally honest with himself, just the *tiniest* bit thrilling) right now a display of someone else’s power, however benignly intended, is deeply unsettling and he violently pulls away. “*Don’t*,” he says sharply.

“Don’t what *mylimasis*?” replies Hannibal, with such excessive patience that Will immediately feels guilty. He takes a few deep breaths, forcing himself to calm down, then scrubs his hand over his face while Hannibal tenderly strokes his hair.

“I’m really sorry,” Will eventually says into the darkness. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“You are overwrought; understandably so. You need some proper rest – and preferably a day or two away from Scotland Yard.”

“Yeah, probably,” replies Will, wishing it were quite as simple as that. He draws in another deep, steadying lungful of air, then rolls on his side and tucks his head beneath Hannibal’s chin. “Things always seem worse in the middle of the night don’t they?”

“Most things, yes.”

“It’s ridiculous really,” says Will, his voice slightly muffled from where his face is pressed against Hannibal’s chest. “I know it is. It’s not even as if I’m a superstitious person.”

“But something is bothering you?”

“Not exactly…It’s more like a feeling I have. I woke up just now consumed with it – this paralysing sense of dread.”

“Describe it to me.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Try,” says Hannibal. “For example, is it a particular event you are dreading?”

“No, it’s not as specific as that.”

“Then you have a sense of foreboding? You are afraid of the fear itself.”

“*Yes*,” replies Will with some energy. “Yes – exactly. And the *helplessness* of it. I feel as if I’m caught in the middle of something I’m powerless to control. It’s like that Sultan in *The Arabian Nights*.”

“Which one? I’m not familiar.”

“His enemies have set up a large slab of rock to fall in his throne room. They spend months preparing it – constant plotting and preparation – just so when the time is right they can cut the rope that’s holding it and his whole world literally comes crashing down. And he has no idea; he’s just living his life as normal, completely unaware that everything needed to destroy him has already happened. It’s all set up, it’s all *in place*; and no matter what he does, that final blow is going to come out of nowhere and trigger disaster.”

“It’s natural to fear uncertainty,” says Hannibal softly. “None of us like to believe we are at the mercy of fate; not least because the fates are capricious and have very little mercy in them. And you are so sensitive Will. And imaginative. I find it easy to understand how you so readily prophesise calamity for yourself. But there is an important difference between you and the Sultan in the story – and that is because you have a freedom of choice.”

“Hardly,” says Will, with a slight hint of bitterness.

“No, let me rephrase. For someone like you – and, it may be said, for me – there *are* no truly right or wrong choices; hence the freedom to stare down disaster and tempt fate as much as we please. It is not merely a question of true or false, correct or incorrect: the road less travelled or the path not taken. None of the usual rules apply.”

Will tightens his grip slightly round Hannibal’s back. “So what do we do then?”

“We simply make our choice,” replies Hannibal in the same rhythmic tone. “And then after we have made it – we make it into the right one.”

Chapter End Notes

Woo! We have some more fanart Victorian Fannibals! The wonderful azrabel totally made my week by doing a stunning image to accompany the fic, so please head on over and give a big virtual hug to a very talented and generous artist :-)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning Will wakes up early. The curtains haven't been drawn from the night before, so to delay leaving the bed he spends some time just gazing out the window as dawn begins to creep across the sky and stain the thick grey clouds with the beginnings of daylight: splashes of orange, persimmon, burnt yellow and deep streaks of red the same colour as blood. Faint scratching sounds from the attic indicate that a few of the servants are awake but otherwise the house feels eerily silent and motionless, almost as if it's waiting for something. Hannibal, unusually, is also still asleep; so Will tilts his head until it's resting on his arm and takes a few moments to enjoy the novelty of simply being able to watch him as the dramatic hues and tints of the sunrise spill across his face through the open curtains like his own personal spotlight. On consideration Will decides that he doesn't look vulnerable in the way most people would: even his stillness telegraphs something imposing, as if waking him would bring severe consequences like a slumbering giant in a folktale. If he *is* actually asleep; he might well just be lying there plotting with his eyes closed (in which case he almost certainly knows that Will's gazing at him and is internally smirking to himself about it). Will shifts a little so he can see Hannibal more clearly, unobscured by the corner of the pillow, and moving as quietly as possible the whole time so as not to rouse him – either from sleep, or into suspicion as to what Will's up to. He can feel Hannibal's breath on his face now; how warm it is in the frigid morning air. His breathing's so shallow (is he *really* asleep?).

I never realised how sad and pale my life was until I saw yours, thinks Will, although he doesn't say it aloud. *I didn't realise I was barely breathing*. He rather wants to kiss Hannibal farewell – just the briefest press of lips against the forehead – but feels too self-conscious about it, and in the end just slides silently out the bed and begins to get dressed before creeping downstairs. There's no sign of any servants, so Will lets himself out and strikes off in the direction of Scotland Yard, muffling his scarf over the lower half of his face to ward off the gnawing cold. Despite the unsociable hour a couple of street sweepers are already in evidence near Whitehall Place, their brooms drifting back and forwards in a melancholy way, and there's something about the endless nature of their task that Will finds rather depressing – that no matter how many times they bend their backs and sway their brooms, London is never going to be clean. Like Sisyphus and his rock…in fact it would be easy enough to say the same about Will's own profession. Not that such defeated pessimism is *remotely* helpful. So Will gives himself a mental slap round the face and then deliberately adopts a more vigorous, lively stride for the final part of his journey – the purpose of which is to meet with Jack Crawford and begin the process of enacting his plan for luring out the Ripper. Because a key part of its success is complete secrecy no one else has been informed except Price. It's also the reason for meeting so early, and which makes good sense for tactical purposes although inevitably means they spend the first few minutes squinting and yawning at one another and force-feeding themselves coffee that Jack brews as thick and dark at petroleum.

"So. Advertising for a *job*?" says Price, once Jack has locked the three of them in his office.

Will, who's perched on the edge of the desk in favour of a chair, now leans back and regards Price meditatively. Having heard it spoken out loud in such detail he's beginning to wonder whether the whole thing is maybe too farfetched after all, but it seems a bit late to admit that now. "Exactly," he says instead, in a voice that he hopes sounds suitably firm and resolute. "It could be the thing to draw him out."

Price whistles. "It's bold, I'll give you that."

"I think Mr Graham makes a very good case," adds Jack and Will shoots him a grateful look. "Both he and Dr Lecter have repeatedly emphasised that this individual has a perverse and abiding fascination with anatomy." He gives a small shudder. "I mean consider, Jim – these poor women were literally dissected in the middle of the street."

"I'm *well* aware," replies Price severely. "You hardly need to remind me."

"But that's why it could work," says Will. "He's following the investigation – he knows it's being led from Scotland Yard; he knows who I am. And the letter he sent suggests he's grandiose, so the idea of being in the midst of the police would appeal to him."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes; I've seen it before. It's not uncommon for these offenders to insinuate their way into the investigation: they loiter round the crimes scenes, they offer witness statements to the police – and of course they go through the newspapers and collect clippings about themselves."

"So we run this in *The Tattle Crime*?" says Jack.

"As soon as possible – we know he reads it. After which the three of us hold interviews."

"And then what?" asks Price. "We can't just arrest all the applicants on the spot."

"Of course we can't," says Will impatiently. "But we can take their contact details and conduct background checks. And then in the event of another Ripper murder, we find out exactly what they were doing and see if they can alibi themselves."

Price now picks up the drafted statement from Jack's desk and reads it aloud: *"Gentleman wanted for the role of medical assistant in association with Scotland Yard. Qualifications unnecessary but candidate must not object to assisting in occasional post-mortems. Liberal terms. Enquires c/o Dr James Price and Inptr. Will Graham."* He replaces the paper on the desk and then glances at Will. "Why just us? Why not Mr Crawford as well?*"*

"It would look odd. The Superintendent wouldn't normally be involved in recruitment for such a menial role. And put 'must be aged 25 to 45.' He's going to be in that range and it'll cut down on a few unnecessary applications."

"How do you know?"

"They always are," replies Will bleakly.

Jack bends over the paper to make the amendment, irritably shaking his pen when the ink refuses to flow. “Of course it would be easier if there was a clear motive,” he says, with the air of someone returning to a well-worn theme. “If he was linked to his victims in some pre-existing way. I mean that’s what makes this whole thing so unusual. People kill for money, or jealousy, or revenge, or to cover their tracks; but who kills for no better reason than simply enjoying it?”

“Heaven knows,” agrees Price.

Or more likely hell, thinks Will; although ultimately he just frowns and says nothing. It’s a refrain he’s heard at constant intervals throughout the investigation, the same repeated quote announced in the same weary tone of voice: that ‘*society is at the mercy of a murderer without a motive*.’ And yet no matter how many times it’s uttered he can never bring himself to accept it, because there’s *always* a motive – it’s just not one that other people can readily understand. Nevertheless there’s also no doubt that a lack of traceable motive makes such people far harder to see. And in turn it makes them more frightening because it removes them one step further from the realm of typical human reasoning. Something unknowable and unrelatable that strolls around humanity and is fascinated by it, and dependent upon it, and even a little in love with it; and yet never truly a member of it. The ultimate outsider…a species apart.

Outside the window a newsboy is brandishing *The London Times* aloft, waving it back and forth to try and tantalise potential buyers. “Ripper still at large!” he shouts, his young voice piercingly high-pitched and insistent. “Read all about it! Questions asked in parliament as Scotland Yard fails to catch Whitechapel fiend!” From where Will’s stood all he can see is the top half of the headline and it flashes in front of him now, writhing and dancing in the winter wind like a gruesome semaphore. *RipperRipperRipper*.

In spite of himself, he shudders.

*****

The rest of the week limps on in a chaotic reversal of the normal routine that sees Will sleeping all day and staking out Whitechapel all night, and ultimately becoming so consumed by both that he forgets the much-dreaded dinner party is looming unpleasantly close on the horizon. Then he comes downstairs one afternoon, still yawning and bleary-eyed, and sees a crate of wine being delivered which makes him realise that – fuck! – it’s tomorrow evening. The thought now make him feel a bit weak with horror: beached and stranded in a sea of social awkwardness.

Although Hannibal’s surgery has finished for the day he’s still in his consulting room, neatly arranged in the usual chair with a pile of newspapers. Will slips in and watches him for a few seconds, fascinated by how unnaturally fast his reading speed appears to be, before suddenly blurting out: “Could I invite a guest?”

“Good afternoon my love,” says Hannibal from behind *The London Times*. “Before I answer that question let me ask you another.”

“Yes?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, yeah – I meant the dinner party. I’m sorry, I know it’s late notice, but that’s what people normally do for these things isn’t it? Go in pairs?”

Hannibal peers thoughtfully at Will from over the top of the newspaper. “And who do you wish to invite?”

Will has already put some thought into this, but with a certain perverse logic of the ‘if-I-ignore-it-I-can-pretend-it’s-not-really-happening’ variety, has postponed doing anything practical about it. Panic now strengthens his resolve, so he looks Hannibal firmly in the eye and says: “I was thinking of asking Al…Mrs Bloom. Or Miss Verger, perhaps.”

There’s a slight pause, and then: “Oh I see,” says Hannibal. “The women you used to lodge with…the ones who *live* together.” The small frown line around his eyebrows relaxes slightly before he vanishes behind the newspaper again. “By all means – if it would make you feel more comfortable.”

Will, who’d been expecting more resistance (possibly even a *battle*) is pleased by such a quick resolution so sits down later that afternoon with some of Hannibal’s expensive stationary and pens a letter to Camden Place explaining how he needs a partner for a dinner engagement and would be delighted if one of them were available to accompany him. A reply duly arrives by return of post in Margot’s bold navy blue handwriting explaining that Alana is attending one of her lectures but that Margot herself is free and would be very pleased to come. Will feels a guilty twinge of disappointment at this but decides, on reflection, that it’s probably for the best – on the one hand, Margot’s liveliness and irreverence promises to be a good distraction, and on the other Will still cherishes something of a secret admiration for Alana and it’s too much to hope that Hannibal, who can be terrifyingly observant at the most inconvenient moments, wouldn’t notice this in some way and be displeased about it. Even so, though. “Oh *balls*,” says Will at the prospect of hours and hours of small talk and social misery. Not that complaining about it is going to do any good of course. So he forcibly rallies himself then pulls on his coat and scarf and sets off for another night’s vigilance in Whitechapel – and where absolutely nothing happens (yet again) and he and Zeller end up propped against a wall and passing the time by teaching each other to swear in British and American respectively.

The next day is the dinner itself and the household (with the sole exception of Hannibal, who remains as coolly inscrutable as ever) begins to adopt a rather frenetic, anticipatory air. In addition to the lighting of extra candles, the polishing of every possible surface, the scrubbing of every conceivable floor, and enormous vats of flowers materialising in all the downstairs rooms, the preparation also includes a temporary influx of new servants on the basis that Hannibal, who keeps a very small number of domestic staff for someone of his wealth and status, is in the habit of hiring a fleet of additional help when entertaining. Will hangs over the side of the bannisters and watches them arrive and be greeted by Mary: mostly what he assumes to be footmen of some kind, alongside a cluster of scullery and kitchen maids. It actually reminds of him of being a child and shyly peering into the sitting room to catch a glimpse of his father’s guests, to the extent that when one of the footmen happens to glance in his direction he promptly ducks out of sight round the side of the railings. *Oh God get a*

grip, says Will to himself in disgust, then forces himself to emerge from behind the banister and seek out Hannibal instead in the hope of acquiring a bit of social confidence via osmosis (not least because he's fairly sure Hannibal would rather throw himself off the banister before he would agree to hide behind it).

In the end this simple task proves easier said than done, because Hannibal is not in the consulting room, nor in the dining room, and not in the kitchen either. "If you're looking for Dr Lecter sir," says Mary kindly, "he said he was going to dress for this evening."

"Oh," says Will, reluctant to admit that he's already looked in the bedroom.

"I imagine he'll be in his dressing room," prompts Mary.

"Oh," says Will again. "Okay." He sounds calm enough, although actually finds this announcement rather disconcerting; firstly because up until now he was completely unaware of the *existence* of a dressing room, and secondly because of her unspoken inference that this highly private space is somewhere Will can be expected to just comfortably saunter into. In this respect he often worries about what the servants think, because they can't possibly not know: it's obvious that he spends all night here (and not in one of the guest rooms) not to mention the fact that they make so much noise. In fact even Hannibal, while admittedly much quieter than Will, is still not above emitting an intermittent gasp or moan – or even, on occasion, a type of growling noise, a rich vibration deep in his throat, and the sound of which always drives Will a bit wild. Stood here now thinking about it he can feel himself starting to blush.

"Well if you'll excuse me sir," adds Mary politely, "there's one or two things I need to see to."

"Yes of course," says Will. "Thank you." He retreats back down the corridor, inadvertently knocking into one of the hired kitchen maids and apologising so fulsomely that she looks slightly taken aback. Will supposes that this is something he always gets wrong, insomuch as one is supposed to preserve the social hierarchy and speak to domestic staff with chilly courtesy rather than engage them like they're social equals; and yet the idea of being so aloof and overbearing is rather impossible. Will watches her scurry off towards the kitchen, casting the occasional confused glance at him over her shoulder, and has a forlorn hope that she puts it down to him being American as opposed to being inappropriate and unboundaried. Oh God though, what if she reports it to Mary? '*I just met the strangest man in the corridor*,' she might say. '*He bumped into me by accident – you never saw a gentleman over-react so much in all your life*.' And then Mary will sigh and shake her head apologetically: '*Oh yes, that's Inspector Graham from Scotland Yard. I once saw him naked you know. And delirious*. *He's often round here having illegal relations with the master of the house.*"

At this point Will makes an executive decision to flee the scene of the crime (like – right fucking now) so dashes upstairs two at a time because even though he has no idea where the dressing room is he'd rather be boiled in oil than go back and ask. Besides it can't be *that* hard to find; logic, after all, dictates that it must be close to the bedroom. Sure enough a small door by the window, which from its placement Will had always assumed to be a built-in cupboard, reveals itself as the entrance to a surprisingly spacious room with a large standing mirror, a rosewood pedestal desk and an ornately carved pier wardrobe and chiffonier. The

walls are painted deep blue, punctuated at intervals by paintings Will vaguely recognises as being Italianate in style, and the general impression is that of a tasteful, under-stated elegance that's distinctly masculine while retaining the occasional soft edge or fine, flowing texture.

"This is *nice*," says Will appreciatively.

"Thank you," replies Hannibal, who is in front of the mirror and adjusting the arrangement of his suit to his satisfaction. "I'm glad you approve"

"How many other secret rooms do you have?" adds Will, pausing to admire the Janus vase which has found a new home on top of the desk.

"It is hardly a secret. Although there may be other rooms you're unaware of – it's a large house, after all."

Fleetingly Will thinks of the basement door, with its improbably large lock, and is on the verge of mentioning it before deciding it's too trivial a subject to bother pursuing (that, and the fact he doesn't want to give the impression he's been snooping around). "I guess I should get ready myself," he says instead.

"Yes, people will be arriving before too much longer. Wait there a moment and I'll fetch the suit for you."

"It's a bit pointless isn't it," says Will, reluctantly unfastening his shirt which he's suddenly decided feels deeply reassuring in its age and general tattiness. "The whole dressing for dinner routine."

"I suppose so. I'm so used to it I don't really think about the pointlessness."

"Hmm," says Will. "It's the 'done thing' though isn't it?" He pauses for a few seconds, wondering if he's being rather ill-mannered in not bothering as a general rule. No doubt he is…he almost certainly is; in fact the servants probably have scandalised whispered conversations about the vulgar American who sits down at Hannibal's pristine antique dining table every evening with no tie and his shirt sleeves rolled up. "Would you rather I did when we're on our own?" he says, before adding in a more conciliatory tone: "I can if you like."

Hannibal's eyes meet Will's in the mirror. "Not particularly. You are fine as you are."

"I bet your servants don't think so."

"What does that matter?" replies Hannibal, beginning to fasten his tie in a series of deft flicking movements. "I'm the one who has to look at you. Besides, I like the fact you're always finding something to rebel against. Your reluctance to conform is one of several traits I find rather appealing."

Will smiles non-committedly, secretly consumed by the suspicion that being mouthy and stubborn might have a certain novelty value at the moment but is undoubtedly the type of thing which could become a source of enormous irritation further down the line. Not that there's much he can do about it: compromise is one thing, but even if such a transformation

were possible he's not willing to alter the fundamentals of his personality for *anyone*. So in the end he simply says "Thanks" and then busies himself in fastening and straightening his collar, which is far more starchy and elaborate than anything he's normally used to and is showing an annoying tendency to scrape against the bottom of his jaw.

"Do you have any cufflinks?" says Hannibal, watching with undisguised amusement as Will finally tames the collar and shifts the battleground to his sleeves instead.

"Yeah, somewhere."

"Take some of mine if you like – that box to your left."

"Oh, okay, thanks," says Will. He rummages around to locate a pair that looks the least expensive before adding in a deliberately casual tone: "So, um, how long do you think this will last?"

"The dinner, you mean? I imagine people will start leaving around 10 o'clock."

"Right."

"You never know," says Hannibal serenely. "You might even enjoy yourself."

Watch out for low-flying pigs, thinks Will gloomily. However, he doesn't want to appear ungrateful so replies "I'm sure it'll be wonderful" before running his hands through his hair in an unintentionally fretful way. The gesture leaves it sticking out in a series of tufts, at which point Hannibal smiles again then prowls up behind Will and begins to smooth it back into place.

"Be still a moment," he says as Will tries to wriggle out of his grasp. "How fidgety you are."

"You don't need to tidy my hair for me. I'm not a child."

"Then be sure to do it yourself. It looks positively *wild*."

"Oh yes," says Will catching sight of himself in the mirror. "It does rather. Even so, you don't need to *groom* me. I bet you'd hate it if I did that to you."

"Yes, very probably."

"Ugh, imagine that. Sat there for ages messing about with each other's hair."

"Point taken."

"Like a pair of *chimpanzees*," says Will triumphantly.

"Speak for yourself."

"Well you started it. You and your peer grooming."

Hannibal smirks again, then grabs Will and spins him round before kissing the side of his face. “But did you know,” he says innocently, “that allogrooming between members of the same species is often conducted as a form of precoital activity?”

“Ugh gross,” replies Will. “Don’t even think about trying to seduce me by tidying my hair. You can take me to the theatre and buy me dinner afterwards like a normal person.”

“I shall do both. And then tidy your hair in the cab on the way home.”

“You shall *not*,” says Will firmly. “Not unless you want me to throw you out the carriage. Oh God, look at the time – we should go downstairs.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely way. He adjusts his tie one final time in the mirror, then holds the door open for Will and follows him through onto the landing. “Although before we do I must thank you, once again, for being so forbearing about the presence of Dr Chilton.”

“It’s fine, I can see the reason for it. After all his issue is with me, not you – it would have looked odd to exclude him.”

“It would,” replies Hannibal, with an odd little quirk of the mouth. “Besides, it is always beneficial to retain the measure of one’s opponent.”

“He’s not an opponent as such though, is he?” Will gives Hannibal an affection push on the arm. “You’re always so melodramatic.”

“Perhaps I *am* elevating the situation somewhat,” says Hannibal apologetically, although Will suspects that this concession isn’t remotely sincere. In fact in this respect he’s starting to think that Hannibal only sees the world according to three types of people (archenemies, mediocre enemies and mongooses) and then works backwards to plot each interaction accordingly. “What are you sniggering at?” says Hannibal, catching sight of Will’s face.

“Nothing.” Hannibal raises a disbelieving eyebrow. “Okay – you.”

“How very gratifying,” says Hannibal. He ruffles Will’s hair then pauses at the bottom of the stairs and puts his hands on his shoulders, holding him out at arm’s length. “You look incredibly beautiful. No one will be able to keep their eyes off you.”

“And how are you going to like that?”

“Not at all. Although beneath that angelic exterior you are such a little monster that even if someone did steal you they would only bring you straight back again.”

“Then it looks like you’re stuck with me,” says Will cheerfully.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Hannibal lets go of Will’s shoulders and takes hold of his wrists instead, lingering on for a few seconds with a pressure that’s almost, but not quite, painful. “However, I’m afraid the opposite is also true in that I am not particularly easy to get away from.”

“Oh? You think so?”

“Try me.”

“Sir,” calls out Mary, whose silhouette has appeared at the far end of the corridor. “Dr Wright has just arrived.”

“Has he?” replies Hannibal softly, neither turning his head nor letting go of Will. “Then I suppose I should go and welcome him.”

“Very good sir,” says Mary. She dips a curtsey and leaves, and Hannibal leans in slightly as if he’s about to say something else before appearing to change his mind. Instead a faint smile flickers across his face as he finally releases Will’s wrists, then turns round and walks away.

*****

After that the evening picks up speed like a living thing with a mind of its own, the various components melding and sliding together in a rather kaleidoscopic way until everything becomes a bit of a blur. Will goes into the parlour, which tonight is masquerading as a kind of reception room, and ultimately discovers that he’s able to sip wine and exchange polite social observations and sundry small-talk with enough poise and calmness to make him feel a bit foolish for so much preliminary dread. Margot arrives not long afterwards, stunning in dark silk and Will’s cameo brooch, closely followed by Zeller in a crumpled suit that’s clearly been recently unearthed from some trunk or other, and then by Price who looks unexpectedly dapper in a silk waistcoat and ascot necktie. Will recognises a few other faces from Scotland Yard, and it’s immediately clear that they all assume him to be here as just another guest who’s received the same politely formal invitation, elegantly inscribed on the same thick cream paper, as they all have themselves. In turn, and in an admittedly rather irrational way, Will knows that he’s both relieved by this and dissatisfied with it. It is, of course, completely impossible to claim any kind of public ownership of Hannibal – no way he can casually walk over and place a hand on his shoulder in the way that Inspector Turner is currently doing with his wife; no feasible means of turning to Price with a whispered confidence along the lines of: ‘Yes, I feel really proud of him; amazing that he was able to organise all this at such short notice.’ Yet even though the idea of exposure is completely horrifying, the emotional penalties of secrecy are unexpectedly high. Will sighs quietly to himself and then turns round to console Sergeant Matthews, currently skittish with nerves and pink-cheeked with remorse for arriving late owing to a snapped axel on his carriage wheel. Although as it happens the wounded feelings of Sergeant Matthews are destined to be soothed by the fact that Dr Chilton turns up infinitely later – and clearly on purpose for the reason of making an entrance, on the one hand, and having the satisfaction of forcing everyone to wait for him on the other. He takes a few moments to preen in the doorway on arrival, rather as if expecting a fanfare of bugles to herald his Glorious Appearance; at which point Zeller begins to hum ‘*Lo! The conquering hero comes’* to Will and Sergeant Matthews, who promptly start cackling and then have to escape into a corner to try and hide it.

“Although it really is very rude to be so late,” says Price when he joins them a few moments later.

“Did he give an excuse?”

“Of course he didn’t; excuses are for us mere mortals, not the illustrious Dr Chiltons of the world who are never under any obligation to either apologise or explain themselves. All he would say is that he was ‘otherwise occupied.’”

Across the room, Dr Chilton pauses in receiving a glass of wine from Hannibal and casts a contemptuous look towards their corner; clearly intended to telegraph that this is where the *lesser* guests have chosen to congregate (and involves elevation of both eyebrows and a little pout of the lips like a disappointed baby).

“He’ll be occupied with my foot up his ass,” says Will, draining the rest of his glass.

“For the purposes of cultural sensitivity, it really ought to be his *arse*,” replies Price. “On this side of the Atlantic an ass is considered a variety of donkey.” He gives Will a kindly pat on the arm. “Although I heartily applaud your sense of initiative.”

Right on cue Dr Chilton, who has just caught sight of Margot and Inspector Turner’s pretty dark-haired wife, is heard exclaiming loudly: “Upon my word! We seem to have abandoned the customary dining arrangements and gone straight to the sweet course: I’ve never seen such *lovely* ladies in all my life.”

Will chokes on the remains of his wine. “I bet he invites them to come and look at his asylum,” whispers Price.

“Probably uses asylum as a euphemism.”

“Come and see my asylum, *lovely* ladies,” adds Zeller in a falsetto, which causes everyone to collapse into subdued cackling once again. Margot joins them in the corner a few seconds later, also slightly pink-cheeked from the effort of trying not to laugh and having clearly been subjected to some of Dr Chilton’s more blatantly pseudo-chivalrous absurdities.

“My dear young lady,” says Price. “May I solemnly apologise to you on behalf of the entire medical profession.”

Margot grins and then turns round to greet Will properly, shaking his hand then leaning forward so he can kiss her cheek. “You look beautiful,” says Will, who’s never seen her in formal evening dress before and is suddenly feeling slightly shy in her presence. “I’m so glad you were able to come.”

“It was very kind of you to invite me.”

“How is Al…Mrs Bloom?”

“Oh Alana is always well,” says Margot fondly. “She told me to give you her love. You must come round and see us again soon.”

“I’d like that, thank you.”

“Have you reached a decision about moving back?” adds Margot, lowering her voice so the others can’t hear. “Or are you still…surveying your options.”

“I’m surveying,” says Will awkwardly.

“Very wise of you, I’m sure,” replies Margot. She flicks her eyes across the room in a casual way – possibly looking at Hannibal; possibly not – then returns to gazing directly into Will’s face. “Besides, I’m not certain we can make you a particularly appealing offer at the moment; the atmosphere in the neighbourhood is not quite what it was.” She pauses and then suddenly looks more serious. “Alana believes the house is being watched.”

“What do you mean?” asks Will sharply.

The silk makes a soft rustling sound as Margot shrugs her shoulder. “I confess, I haven’t noticed anything myself. But Alana is adamant that she’s returned several times from her evening lectures and found a man standing across the street. The last time it happened she called out to him but he didn’t respond – then disappeared straight afterwards.”

Will’s frown deepens. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Nor I. Although it may be that it’s nothing to do with us; a new family has recently moved next door and he might belong to them somehow.”

“Perhaps, but I still don’t like it. I’ll come round and put some locks on your windows.”

“Oh there’s no need, thank you Will, we’ve done that ourselves. Although do have dinner with us next week if you’re free – Alana’s lecture series will have finished by then and I know how much she’d like to see you. And of course you could bring your own guest too, if you wanted.” This time her eyes definitely flicker towards Hannibal, at which point Will clears his throat and blushes. “Or come alone if you prefer,” adds Margot, relenting slightly. “We don’t need to make a formal evening out of it – the three of us sat round the kitchen table would do just as nicely.”

Will opens his mouth to tell her how pleasant that would be, but is distracted halfway through by the noisy entrance of Jack who’s inadvertently upstaged Dr Chilton by arriving even later – although unlike the latter is fulsome in his apologies – at which point it’s finally possible to move through to the dining room. Hannibal’s reputation for outstanding cooking promptly comes into its own from the second the servants arrive to serve the first course; although even Will (who subsists in a secret yet near-constant sense of awe over Hannibal’s various competencies) can't help growing vaguely exhausted by the hysterically extravagant praise that's heaped upon him following every single dish. It’s only *food* after all; anyone would think he’d had a baby, or worked out how to fly.

“Spectacular,” says Jack with his mouth full. “The meat is so subtly flavoured. And the arrangement is impeccable; I haven’t seen such a beautiful table since I was at The Criterion.”

“Oh yes,” replies Hannibal with a long look at Will. “As someone recently observed to me: the *way* something is presented is just as important as *what* one presents.”

Jack, who clearly doesn’t have any sensible answer for this, takes another large mouthful instead and then brandishes his fork with gusto like someone waving a stick for a dog.

“Frederick?” adds Hannibal smoothly. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Assuredly so. Taste is foremost of course, but placement and aesthetics should never be underestimated. In fact I’m not averse to dabbling in the culinary arts myself. And cooking can undoubtedly be considered an art. A great art, one might say.”

Will, who’s privately thinking that Dr Chilton wouldn't recognise great art if the Mona Lisa came up and kicked him in the balls, politely agrees that this is indeed the case.

“More wine Frederick?” says Hannibal.

“Thank you, yes.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in cookery,” adds Jack good-naturedly. “I must say I’ve never paid much attention to that sort of thing myself.” He pauses and briefly looks wistful. “I left such matters to my dear wife, God rest her soul.”

“Cookery,” repeats Dr Chilton loudly, his voice slurring slightly on the last syllable. “The gastronomic *virtuosities.”*

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” replies Jack, who clearly doesn’t think anything of the kind.

“Food for the soul,” says Dr Chilton. He emits a sudden giggle, rasping and high-pitched, and Jack glances at him in surprise.

“Dr Chiton should be congratulated,” mutters Price to Will. “He has elevated idiocy to orchestral and operatic levels. Where does one *get* idiocy like that? Did he buy it?”

“I don’t know,” says Will uneasily. “I think something might be the matter with him.”

“What’s that Mr Graham?” Dr Chilton’s voice has abruptly switched again, the coyly insinuating humour interchanged with something sharp and strident that shatters through the air like nails and causes everyone to fall silent and stare at him. “*What* did you just say?”

Will puts down his fork and is about to reply that Dr Chilton has obviously had too much to drink, but finds himself faltering at the last second on the grounds that there’s no way this can realistically be the case considering he’s only on his second glass of wine. More to the point he doesn’t *look* drunk: if anything, given the rigid muscles in his jaw and the weirdly unfocussed glassy gaze, he looks *drugged*. But as an explanation this seems even less plausible; in fact people are going to assume Will himself has been laying into the pharmaceuticals if he voices such an outlandish suspicion. “I said I hoped you were feeling well,” he finally says instead.

“Oh there’s nothing the matter with *me*,” announces Dr Chilton venomously. “Which is more than can be said for some people.”

“Okay – great,” says Will with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Dr Chilton emits another bizarre growling noise. “You know I should slap that superior look off your face,” he says; at which point Will is sorely tempted to tell him not to bother on the

grounds that he'd only discover another, slightly smaller superior look straight underneath the first one. "Nothing the matter with *me,* Mr-Will-Graham. I'm just sat here with Dr Lecter and Superintendent Crawford having a perfectly civilised conversation about food." Dr Chilton pauses and arduously gestures from Hannibal to Jack with his fork. "Not that that's anything *you'd* be able to relate to. As I recall, the last conversation I had with you about food involved cannibalism."

A sharp, collective intake of breath greets this speech as the other guests shift uneasily in their seats while Hannibal and Jack raise their eyebrows simultaneously and exchange long glances with one another. "Oh yes indeed," says Dr Chilton, seemingly delighted by the reaction he's stirred up. "It's why he nearly ended up in my asylum."

"All right now Frederick, that's enough," says Jack firmly. "I hardly think this is a suitable…"

"*Cannibalism*," repeats Dr Chilton. His voice spirals into a shriek, then appears to go slightly wrong halfway through and dissolves into an eerily gurgling laugh instead.

"You seem unaccountably preoccupied with that topic Frederick," says Hannibal smoothly, the words clicking against one another like jewels. "But I'm afraid I must agree with Mr Crawford and insist on a change of subject."

"Why?" demands Dr Chilton. "So he can steal those insights as well?" He leans forward and waves his finger in Jack's face, jabbing and pointing it like a loaded gun. "You should be aware, Jack Crawford, that I know more about this situation than you can *possibly* imagine."

"What situation?" says Jack sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"Whitechapel of course," replies Dr Chilton, oblivious to how Inspectors Turner and Brent are beginning to stare at him. He drops his fork onto his plate before picking up his knife and waving that instead. "And the rest!"

"Upon my word Frederick…" splutters Jack.

Hannibal delicately raises his glass to his mouth to conceal the small smile that's beginning to flicker there then replaces it on the table and puts his hand on Dr Chilton's arm.

"Everything!" continues Dr Chilton. "You keep an eye out on your next oh-so-secret surveillance mission."

"Come with me now Frederick," says Hannibal in a softly solicitous voice. "It's time to bring the evening to a close. Let me have my housekeeper call a cab for you."

"And of course the Ripper is a medical man," adds Dr Chilton. "Surgical skills! You wait and see. No one's listened to me but I've always said so."

"Of course you have," replies Hannibal soothingly.

"The police are so *ignorant*. They don't know the first thing about it."

“No? Then I’m sure you shall be able to…enlighten them.”

“I certainly shall!” snarls Dr Chilton with an emphatic stamp of the foot. Nevertheless, he still appears strangely docile in the face of Hannibal’s coolly controlling manner and despite the hissing and blustering ultimately allows himself to be led away by the arm as if helpless to resist. The spectacle is incredibly striking, and watching it makes Will fully appreciate – possibly for the very first time – the remarkable degree of power Hannibal manages to exert simply by appearing at all times to be the sanest person in the room. As such he manages to manoeuvre Dr Chilton into the corridor with minimal effort before closing the door behind them with a soft discreet *click*; at which point their departure is immediately greeted with a frantic outbreak of conversation amongst the remaining guests.

“Good *lord*,” says Price faintly. “I mean…my goodness. What on earth was all that about?”

Will, who in spite of himself feels rather unnerved by the whole scene, shakes his head in confusion. “Maybe he’s unwell? I don’t know. Perhaps a delirium of some kind?”

“Normally I would agree, but he didn’t appear at all feverish,” replies Price. “The cause appeared to be more – well…more *mental* in origin.”

“Perhaps he should be suspended from the investigation Mr Crawford,” suggests Zeller in an earnest undertone. “At least temporarily. I mean all that innuendo about knowing the ‘truth’– it was really bizarre.”

“Agreed,” says Price firmly. “And remember Sergeant Matthews *did* insist they’d seen him in Whitechapel.” He pauses and then suddenly looks uncomfortable as if processing the possible implications of this.

“I hardly know what to think,” admits Jack. “Only that there seems to be something *extremely* odd going on.” He drums his fingers on the table for a few seconds and then glances at the assembled faces, a deep frown line furrowing between his eyebrows. “And I’ll be honest with you gentlemen: I don’t have a very good feeling about it.”

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“Dr Chilton needs to be more careful,” says Will later in the evening once the guests have finally departed and he and Hannibal have managed to escape upstairs with a bottle of wine. “All that ranting about Whitechapel – Mr Crawford is starting to get suspicious.”

“Is he?” replies Hannibal, who is peering into the mirror as he meticulously unfastens his tie.

“Yes, he said as much after the two of you left.”

“And what about you? Are you suspicious?”

“Of *him*?” says Will incredulously. “Of course not. Jack the Ripper isn’t a doctor. And while the first Ripper almost certainly is, there’s no way Dr Chilton has either the poise or cunning to be responsible for that set of murders. So no – as much as I’d love to see him carted off to Pentonville, he’s not exactly at the top of my suspect list. ”

“Doubtless you make a very good point,” replies Hannibal. “Although unfortunately for Dr Chilton, Jack Crawford has a bad habit of not taking what you say completely seriously.”

“I know.” Will pulls his shirt over his head then collapses backwards onto the bed and runs his hands through his hair. “God, imagine how ironic that would be: Dr Chilton ranting his way into getting arrested and me having to talk Jack Crawford down.”

“And would you?”

“Of course I would. If Dr Chilton was charged it would mean letting the *actual* perpetrator go free.”

“What an intriguing image,” says Hannibal thoughtfully. “You advocating so fiercely on Dr Chilton’s behalf.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t have a choice, would I? And it might be on his *behalf* but it’d hardly be for his *sake*.”

“No; rather for the sake of the facts. The facts are not in very safe hands with Jack Crawford and co. are they? Not like you.”

“But it’s so obvious.”

“I know, and yet the others still struggle to see it.”

“Well it’s not like it’s going to happen,” replies Will, losing interest in Dr Chilton.

“Naturally.” Hannibal sits down on the bed and gazes at Will for a few seconds before leaning over to smooth his hair out his eyes. “Verbal insinuations are ultimately rather irrelevant. A conviction would require something more.” For a few seconds his fingers trail across Will’s cheekbone, light as feathers. “After all, it’s not as if they are going to find any physical evidence in his home.”

“Exactly,” says Will, yawning and leaning into the touch.

“Of course he hardly helped his case by trying to illegally silence you so *very* soon after you raised the cannibalism link,” adds Hannibal idly as he continues to stroke Will’s hair. “Or the fact he’s been seen frequenting Whitechapel.”

Will’s eyes snap open again. “Oh come on. You don’t seriously think…?”

“Seriously? No, I do not. I am only agreeing with you that there are several pieces of circumstantial evidence that make outbursts like tonight particularly unwise on his part. Nevertheless, I insist we abandon the whole subject of Dr Chilton. I’m afraid I don’t find him particularly interesting. *You*, on the other hand…” He slowly trails his finger down Will’s throat and across his collar bone. “Look at you. You are positively *edible*.”

“Enough with the cannibal references,” says Will, closing his eyes again. “You sound like Dr Chilton.”

“Well it’s true. You are…appetising.”

“And you are *appalling*,” replies Will. He swats at Hannibal with his hand, who neatly dodges it, so takes hold of the back of his shirt instead and gives it a tug. “Come and lie down, you’re miles away up there.”

Hannibal complies and then pulls Will up against him. “It *is* true though,” he adds. “There are qualities about you which make you irresistible; something to adulate and adore. I didn't fully appreciate that when I first saw you. Or at least I underestimated it. You lend yourself more to being an object of fascination and intrigue. Frustration, even. And yet it’s impossible to know you for any length of time without growing aware of how deeply and fatally *loveable* you are.”

“Fatally?”

“Hmm, yes. Berserk passion.”

“You sound surprised.”

”Perhaps I am.”

“Or perhaps you just didn't recognise it in yourself,” says Will after a pause. “The capacity, that is. The ability to feel that way.”

“You are not *entirely* wrong,” replies Hannibal in a thoughtful tone. “In this, as in so much else, you challenge my assumptions about myself and I am obliged to make you the exception that proves the rule. Or perhaps it’s simply another example of our mutual contradictions: cool indifference vs. the capacity to love.”

“Or *be* loved,” says Will.

“Yes, that too,” replies Hannibal. He leans forward and kisses Will’s forehead. “Although we should continue this conversation another time; you look exhausted.”

“I’m all right.”

“I know you are, but you have a tendency to forget how ill you’ve been. You need rest – technically you are still convalescing.”

“I feel like I’ve been convalescing my entire life,” replies Will rather aimlessly, although he obeys the request regardless and climbs into bed, shifting around restlessly before finally curling onto his side with his face cupped in his hand.

“What is the matter?” says Hannibal gently. “You’ve become pensive again.”

“Have I?”

“Yes – it’s like it just descends on you.”

“I’m not sure,” says Will, suddenly reluctant to acknowledge this.

“The same sense of foreboding as previously?”

“Maybe. My sleep isn’t that great at the moment, I guess. I have bad dreams.”

“I know, I can tell. They make you very restless.”

“Do they?” asks Will, attempting to be flippant. “You mean I try and kick you out the bed?”

“As if you are fighting something that I can’t assist you with,” replies Hannibal after a short pause. “Which of course is exactly how the situation stands – you are battling the recess within your own mind. It’s a place we must all travel to eventually, and to which we must all go alone.”

“How wonderfully cheerful,” says Will. “Thank you doctor.”

“You are welcome,” replies Hannibal with a small smile. “Although do tell me if you think I can be of any practical help?”

“Well *actually*…” says Will. Then he trails off, because he’s suddenly remembered his secret yearning to have Alana read to him – and how comforting he imagined it might be – and is wondering if he can possibly summon up the courage to ask Hannibal to perform the same service.

“What?” says Hannibal patiently.

Will rolls onto his back, then onto his side again, and after a prolonged degree of blushing, throat clearing and hair tugging finally blurts it out. Then he immediately regrets it and feels overcome with self-consciousness – although contrary to expectation Hannibal gives no indication of finding anything odd or infantile in the request, instead appearing perfectly content for Will to curl up next to him and be lulled into sleep by the rhythm of his voice. So over the course of the next few nights a routine of sorts becomes established, in which Will finally decides that having the courage to show someone your vulnerability can actually be an unexpected source of comfort and consolation, and Hannibal uncomplainingly reads himself hoarse simply for the satisfaction of having Will fall asleep in his arms at the end of it. Deciding that Will’s tastes are going to be quite eclectic he varies the material, alternating from poetry (for which Will shows a preference for the gloom of the 17th century while growing impatient with the more modern sentimental verses), to philosophical or scientific essays (which provoke heated disagreements) before moving onto chapters from serialised novels: *A Relíquia*, *Robert Elsmere* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

“I thought that had been banned,” says Will, his voice slightly muffled from where his face his pressed against Hannibal’s chest.

“No, censored only.”

“They censor *everything*,” says Will irritably. “Miserable old bastards; it’s even worse than back home. Anyway isn’t *Dorian Gray* supposed to be some sort of, I don’t know, artistic manifesto?”

“After a fashion. Although several people propose – and I agree – that it will be remembered for embodying one of the great literary concepts of the age, much in the way *Jekyll and Hyde* does.”

“What?”

“Duplicity,” says Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair. “The moral implication of living a double life. No wonder people find it so threatening; the reader has no wish to accept the truth of the protagonist’s duality means because it would mean acknowledging the existence of his own.” Will shifts slightly but doesn’t respond and Hannibal continues to deftly trail his fingers over his head, pressing harder until he’s touching Will’s skull like someone attempting to chart it out: occipital bone, parietal bone, up along the jaw then straight across the forehead. “That divine spark within us all,” adds Hannibal softly. “Whether we saunter sinlessly along some sheltered path or descend into tragedy and chaos: with all the emotion, thought and impulse that come with it. Whether we truly live or merely exist. One life or another.”

“Yes,” says Will abruptly.

“*Yes*,” repeats Hannibal. He leans down and kisses the side of Will’s face then after a short pause turns the page; and as he resumes reading Will thinks he can detect a faint smile in his voice: “*‘Yes, you will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit.’”*

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A week to the day after placing their advert in *The Tattle Crime*, Will, Jack and Price assemble in the boardroom at Scotland Yard to begin the process of conducting interviews. In order to maintain the strict level of secrecy it’s agreed that the candidates should be invited towards the end of the day; which has the advantage of ensuring a nearly empty building, but also means sitting in the murkiness of the evening surrounded by the stench of paraffin lamps. In fact the boardroom, which is unappealing enough even in the summer courtesy of dark oak panelling on the walls and black wrought iron on virtually everything else, adopts a full-fledged gothic gloom in the depths of winter. Directly opposite Will are a series of oil paintings, presumably of previous Superintendents, and in the flickering light numerous pairs of scowling eyes seem to be twitching across their respective canvasses every time he glances up.

“What a ghastly situation this is,” says Price, tapping his pencil against the desk in a restless, fidgety rhythm that grates across every single one of Will’s nerves. “I want him to turn up and yet, I freely confess, I’m *terrified* in case he does.”

“I understand – but you know he can’t hurt us in here.”

“Can I have that in writing Mr Graham?”

“It’ll be fine Jim,” adds Jack, who’s just walked in with three cups of tea precariously balanced on a little tray. “The first night was always going to be the worst. This time tomorrow we won’t think anything of it.”

“How dreadfully *macho* you both are,” says Price wryly, taking a fastidious sip of his tea. “Speak for yourselves – I don’t care how many nights I spend interviewing prospective serial killers Jack, I shall never be swaggering round the room the way you are. Or kicking back in my chair with my shirt sleeves rolled up like Mr Graham here.”

“Yes, you *do* seem very relaxed,” says Jack, passing Will one of the cups.

“I’m not really – I’m just good at hiding it.”

“I suppose you must be used to dealing with large amounts of fear,” replies Jack thoughtfully. “With an imagination like yours.”

“Of course he’s not scared,” says Price. “I forbid you to be scared Mr Graham – I am relying on hiding behind you the moment our man comes walking through the door.”

“Not that it’s very likely of course,” admits Will. “We could carry on doing this all week and never get a promising suspect.”

“Well we’ll see won’t we? Anyway, I still maintain you don’t look scared. Even your beard is flexing its muscles…yes, Dixon, what is it?”

“’Scuse me gentlemen,” says the porter, who’s head has just appeared around the door. “But the first applicant has arrived.”

“Oh? And how did he look?”

The porter shrugs. “I hardly know sir. Youngish chap; seems pleasant enough.”

“I suppose they all seem pleasant enough at first,” says Price gloomily.

“That’s all very well,” replies Jack, “but there’s only one way of finding out isn’t there?” He pauses and then casts them both a significant look. “Dixon, show him in if you please.”

“Showtime,” mutters Will under his breath.

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Through prior agreement Price and Jack take charge of asking the set questions, leaving Will free to silently scrutinise each person and interject with directed queries if he feels anything needs clarifying. It’s a repetitive yet demanding task, requiring constant concentration as one by one the candidates traipse in and submit to the same round of enquiries: *What do you feel qualifies you for this role? What led you to apply for it? Would conducting autopsies bother you? Why/Why not?* None of them stand out as particularly noteworthy, nor strike Will as being anything other than what they claim to be: an unemployed mortuary assistant, a medical student wishing to supplement his income, a doctor who’s seeking a new position after his former hospital closed. The latter turns his watch chain over and over in his twitching fingers as if it’s a string of rosary beads then writhes in his chair whenever someone asks him a question – and immediately has the misfortune of rousing Jack’s suspicions on the grounds that he appears to be hiding something.

“He’s not the one,” says Will after the man has performed a cringing bow to the three of them and slunk out the room. “The Ripper isn’t an actual doctor.” Defiantly he adds: “At least *Jack* the Ripper isn't. The first one, on the other hand, most definitely has surgical skills.”

“But his *manner.* There was something shifty about him. As I said – he’s hiding something.”

“His drinking problem,” snaps Will. “Didn’t you see the tremor in his hands? And those broken capillaries round his nose – it’s an obvious sign. I’ll bet his hospital hasn’t closed at all; he’s been dismissed because of his alcoholism. Otherwise why would he be applying for a position for which he’s obviously over-qualified?” He screws up the paper listing the applicant’s names and neatly hefts it into the wastepaper basket. “None of those men were the person we’re looking for.”

“Well there are more coming over the next few days,” adds Price. “Who knows? And look, here’s Dixon again. I’m getting the most peculiar sense of *déjà vu*.”

“Not wishing to disturb you again sirs,” says the porter apologetically. “But there’s someone else just arrived about the job.”

“Who?” asks Will sharply. “There’s no one else on the list.”

“He didn’t give me his name Mr Graham; just said that you were expecting him.”

“Well we’re not,” interjects Price. “And it’s gone seven o’clock – tell him to come back tomorrow.”

“Oh let’s just see him now and be done with it,” says Jack. “Mr Graham?”

Will waves his hand. “Fine by me.”

“Oh, very well,” says Price tetchily. “Although anyone would think the pair of you didn’t have homes to go to.”

“Don’t just stand there Dixon,” adds Jack to the porter, who’s hovering and glancing doubtfully at Price. “Tell him to come through.”

“Yes sir.”

“*Honestly*,” says Price. “What a cheek; turning up so late without an appointment.”

Will nods half-heartedly then sighs and stretches his arms behind his head, flexing his aching neck muscles as he listens to the slow pounding of footsteps coming down the corridor. The emptiness of the building gives them a rather sonorous, echoing quality as they gradually get louder and louder until coming to an abrupt halt just outside the boardroom. Then there’s an unnaturally long pause before the handle starts to creak open – at which point Will glances up and gives a visible flinch as a thin wiry figure slinks into the room.

“All right Mr Graham?” whispers Price.

“Yes of course,” replies Will. Without missing a beat he scribbles a few quick words onto his notepad and slides it towards Jack.

“Come in then young man,” says Price. “Take a seat just here. Would you care for a glass of water?”

“You’re rather late, I must say,” adds Jack. “We weren’t expecting anyone else today.” He glances down and then stiffens slightly as he reads Will’s note: *That’s Matthew Brown*.

“Weren’t you?” comes the reply in the same eerily crooning tone that Will remembers so well from previously. “I sent my application in as directed.”

Jack clears his throat. “We never received it.”

“Oh,” says Matthew. “What a shame.” He pauses and swivels his eyes in Will’s direction. “Hello Mr Graham.”

Will gives a curt nod in response and leans back in his chair with his arms folded: coolly appraising and never once taking his eyes off Matthew’s face.

“Well then,” says Price uneasily, who’s obviously detected the tension yet is uncertain as to what it might mean. “Now that you *are* here we may as well begin. Firstly, please can you tell the panel why you want this position?”

“I want to work with like-minded colleagues,” replies Matthew, who’s still staring at Will. “To learn from them. And to let them learn from me.”

“Rather presumptuous, Mr…”

“Brown. Matthew Brown.”

“Rather presumptuous of you Mr Brown. You’d be here in a very junior capacity. What makes you think *we’d* be learning from *you*?”

“What makes you think you have nothing to learn?” replies Matthew, who despite addressing Price is still gazing fixedly at Will. “You can always be motivated and encouraged by the experiences of others. It’s just a question of finding someone who’s…compatible.”

“And you think you’d be compatible in Scotland Yard?” asks Jack with a hint of sarcasm.

Matthew’s mouth quirks into a little smile: crooked and knowing and flashing the faintest glimmer of teeth. “I think you could learn to understand me. We could learn to understand each other.”

There’s an uncomfortable pause, and then: “Why do you keep staring at Mr Graham?” says Price sharply.

“I don’t mean any offence,” replies Matthew in the same crooning voice. “It’s just – appreciation.” Price clears his throat then glances nervously at Jack. “You’re not offended, are you Mr Graham?”

There's a further agonised pause and then Will finally leans forward himself, resting both elbows on the desk top while keeping his face completely still. In the corner of his eye he can see the crazed flickering of moths flinging themselves against the wire cages surrounding the gas light; can hear the sound of their small bodies crashing into the metal. "Why would you care if I was?" he replies evenly. "People should never deny the truth to avoid offence."

Matthew smiles and leans forward too, his face dipping in and out of the shadows in a way that makes his skin swell and heave, as if he's wearing a disintegrating mask. "Do you care about the truth Mr Graham?"

"Yes."

"That must be frustrating for you," says Matthew with another small smile.

"Not really. Denying the truth doesn't change the facts."

"Oh yes, the *facts* of the case," murmurs Matthew Brown with relish. He brings his hands together in a sharp clap to emphasise the point, the noise exaggeratedly loud in the silent room to the extent that both Price and Jack flinch. "They say that in the newspapers all the time don't they? And in courtrooms as well: 'the facts of the case are these.' The *known* facts…You know a lot don't you Mr Graham?"

Will slowly removes his glasses and tucks them into his pocket before glancing up and looking Matthew directly in the eye. "A few things," he replies softly. "I think I might know about you."

"Oh no Mr Graham. Not really. Not yet; I'm just here to apply for a job. And all I know about *you* is what I read about in the papers." For the first time Matthew finally turns towards Jack and Price and repeats, "Just here to ask about a job," before the crooked little smile briefly reappears. "And then, while I'm here, to take the opportunity to see Mr Graham in person. Killing two birds with one stone – as it were." His eyes swivel back to Will. "That's an odd expression isn't it Mr Graham? And you never really see many birds in London. Mostly just pigeons…dirty common pigeons, all scrabbling around in the dirt and the filth. But if you wait long enough, and look hard enough, you might get lucky one evening and finally see something prettier. Just one. Or maybe even two."

"Mr Brown," says Jack abruptly. "We've been asking all our candidates to complete a set of forms. It's standard procedure at Scotland Yard, although I'm afraid we gave our final set to the last applicant. Didn't we Dr Price?"

"Yes," replies Price in a faint voice. "Um, yes, that's quite right Mr Crawford."

"So if you can kindly come with me then I'll get you some new ones to fill in. There might be a bit of a wait as our clerks have gone home for the evening, but you won't mind that will you?"

"Oh no," says Matthew, twisting his eyes in Jack's direction. "I won't mind that at all."

“Well come along then,” replies Jack with feigned heartiness. “Dr Price, Mr Graham: wait here a moment would you? I’m just – ah – going to find Inspector Turner and see if he can locate the paperwork for Mr Brown.”

“I’ll see you very soon Mr Graham,” adds Matthew as Jack leads him out the room. The door shuts behind them with a decided click, at which point Price swings round to Will with an expression that’s an urgent combination of both disturbance and intrigue.

“Good lord,” he says, sounding more than a little shocked. “What a hideously unsettling young man. Mr Graham, what on *earth* is going on? You must tell me.”

“I’m not entirely sure – yet,” replies Will slowly. “Although Mr Crawford is clearly trying to get him into one of the holding cells. I except we’ll have an opportunity to question him very soon.”

“But you don’t think that he’s…that it’s *him*?”

Will hesitates then runs his hand across his forehead. “It’s too early to say for sure. But if he’s not…then I think that the Ripper will turn out to be someone very much like him.”

“Good lord,” repeats Price weakly. He takes a rather trembling sip of his tea, only to promptly jump and spill it as the silence is ripped apart by a violent crash from the corridor that’s quickly followed with an outraged bellowing sound from Jack. Will and Price exchange horrified looks of alarm then fling back their chairs and race outside. The lamps haven’t been lit in the corridor and for a few seconds its’s impossible to see anything beyond their own silhouettes, flickering from the light of the boardroom doorway in the same crazed manner as the moths.

“Mr Crawford!” shouts Will, adding “Oh *shit*,” under his breath as his eyes adjust to the murky gloom and he’s able to see Jack properly for the first time: doubled up against the wall and clutching his stomach.

“Run and fetch my medical bag Mr Graham,” snaps Price, switching into emergency mode with a quick efficiency that’s worlds away from the nervous agitation of only seconds before. “It’s in the office – *now*, fast as you can.”

“No, I’m fine,” gasps Jack, despite the fact he’s badly struggling to draw breath. “I’m not hurt. The little bastard winded me and ran for it. That way – *that way*! After him, quick!”

No one waits to be told a second time. As the fastest runner Will soon outpaces both Price and the gaggle of officers who’ve been alerted to Jack’s shouts; tearing off down the corridor, through the now-deserted main office and into the foyer – where the solitary swinging door indicates that Matthew Brown can’t be too far ahead. Will sprints outside then hovers for a few seconds in the freezing air, straining his ears for the sound of footsteps before taking off the direction of Charing Cross Road. The fog is descending again and he can only see a few feet in front of him as lanterns and carriage lights flash in and out of his peripheral vision like ghostly will-o-the-wisps. Then for a few seconds he thinks he sees the outline of Matthew’s distinctive blue coat and feels a surge of hope before the figure swerves to the left and is lost once again in the shadows and the swirling choking fog. Will speeds up again, dodging round

lampposts and leaping over kerbstones before a rickety wagon veers across the road straight in front of him, perilously close to knocking him down, and he has to jump out the way to avoid it before taking a deep breath and forcing himself on – on and on; yet with hope fading and frustrating growing, until the time he's reached St Martin-in-the-Fields and is bitterly forced to concede that the scent has gone cold and Matthew Brown, yet again, has exercised his eerie ability to melt away into the night.

"*Fuck*," hisses Will, overwhelmed with a crushing sense of disappointment. He pushes his hair back off his face then leans against the wall and draws in a few laboured breaths, battling the urge to let rip with a shout of fury at being outwitted for a second time. Because it *does* feel like being outmatched. It feels personal – it feels as if it's a game. The whole dynamic in the interview room attested to it: the mocking smile never far from Matthew Brown's pale feral face; the twitching gleam in his eyes; all those cryptic remarks…the definite sense of a gauntlet being thrown down at Will's feet – Will, who's currently feeling too cheated and resentful to fully appreciate the subtleties of what it might have meant. And it's probably that, more than anything else, which makes Will realise far more is being expected of him than to simply plunge about the deserted streets of London in mindless, angry pursuit. This is about *strategy*. It really is a twisted game, and one which requires cunning and patience in order to play. Fleetingly, he remembers Hannibal's remarks from the other week: '*Never be governed by your emotions. Relish them, exploit them, or recruit them, but don't allow them to control you*.'

"So do it," mutters Will under his breath. "Think. Fucking *think*." He takes a few deep breaths, forcing himself to calm down, then closes his eyes and begins to assemble the various components in his head with lightning speed before turning them over one by one like a living, breathing puzzle box of bone and breath and skin. Matthew Brown's appearance at Scotland Yard. His determination to speak with Will: '*You can learn from me, we can learn from each other…the facts of the case are these*.' A message was undoubtedly being imparted; a coded message. An invitation of sorts – if only Will can understand the reason to RSVP. This is his design. '*Killing two birds with one stone…you might get lucky one evening and finally see something prettier. Just one. Or maybe even two.*'

"Oh God," whispers Will out loud. "Oh God, oh *God*." And then for few nightmarish seconds, stood there in the moonlight and the fog and the looming shadow of St Martin's crypt, he briefly loses track of his surroundings and is submerged with a sense of helpless panicked horror as he remembers Margot's words at the dinner party and slots the final part of the conversation into place alongside the rest. Because he suddenly knows, with a sick lunge of certainty, *exactly* where Matthew Brown is running to at such speed.

For a few seconds Will glances yearningly back towards Scotland Yard but it's at least 10 minutes in the wrong direction, and by the time he's explained what's happened and assembled a party of policemen…fuck, even if they were lucky enough to find a cab straight away there still wouldn't be time. So Will takes another deep breath to focus his mind and steady his purpose and then he begins to run. Runs in the direction of Camden Place – runs like he's never run before in his life.

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“It’s good that Will’s doing so well,” says Alana. She bites off a piece of thread and deftly winds it through her needle before returning to the pile of sewing on her lap – which is not delicate embroidery or artfully rendered tapestry (both herself and Margot heartily despising such useless, time-consuming fripperies) but a stout piece of stockinette that’s destined to become an underskirt to keep Margot warm when she’s striding around London and ignoring social decorum in order to ride on the top deck of the omnibus. “Do you really think that was the man he’s living with?”

“Oh they’re *living together* all right,” says Margot. “It was entirely obvious. At least it was to me. Poor Will. He never mentioned it, either in the invitation or in person – he must have been hoping I’d assume he was there as a guest. But I only had to see them together to know it.”

“I confess, I’m curious. I should have liked to meet him myself.”

“I’m sure there’ll be an opportunity dearest. In that respect I’m curious too; I’d like to watch the two of you cross wits.”

Alana laughs then re-threads her needle which has worked its way loose again. “Imposing, was he?”

“Not as such. I dare say to a casual observer he’d seem impeccably courteous and approachable.”

“But?”

“But he reminded me of the expression ‘still waters run deep.’ I can imagine there’s a lot more going on beneath the surface than he allows his audience to see.”

“His ‘audience,’” repeats Alana, raising an eyebrow. “You think there’s an element of performance then? That it’s a façade?”

“Perhaps,” replies Margot thoughtfully. “He struck me as someone whose every thought and action is incredibly controlled to achieve a particular effect.” She stretches her legs out in front of her so she can rub one slim foot against Alana’s. “Or, admittedly, perhaps I’m being overly fanciful. I hardly spoke to him after all.”

Alana returns the pressure of Margot’s foot and then frowns slightly. “You don’t think he’s mistreating Will?”

“I don’t think Will would allow himself to be mistreated.”

“Maybe not *knowingly*,” says Alana.

“Well if it’s any consolation, dearest, I didn’t see anything to cause me alarm. On the contrary they seemed besotted with each other; it was actually rather touching. And Will looks far healthier and happier than he did when he lived here.”

Alana smiles at this although a trace of the frown, faint as gossamer, still lingers around her eyebrows. “Well,” she eventually adds, “at the very least I find the idea of it amusing.”

“Which part, love?”

“The fact that they were probably congratulating themselves on being incredibly discreet and restrained, and all the time unaware of your sharp little eyes seeing through the whole thing.”

“Hiding in plain sight,” replies Margot, who’s also started to smile. “Of course men always think they’re in command of every situation. Not that I entirely blame them – considering the other guests were mostly detectives I’ve never seen such obliviousness in all my life.”

Alana laughs and then finishes her row of stitches, critically holding the cloth at arm’s length to determine how straight she’s made the seam. “It looks perfect,” says Margot warmly, oblivious to the slight faults in the workmanship and only aware of the results of labour and love. “How good you are to me dearest; I know how much you hate to sew.”

“I want you to be comfortable.”

“I believe I’d be comfortable in sackcloth and ashes if you’d made them.”

Alana affectionately wrinkles her nose at Margot and then returns to the sewing. “You know, we should certainly invite Will round again. I miss seeing him.”

“Oh yes, I miss him too.”

“And then at least he’d have somewhere to confide should he ever need it.”

“We should persuade him to bring his landlord with him,” says Margot mischievously. She stands up and moves behind Alana, kissing the top of her head then beginning to unknot her chignon until coils of dark hair tumble down her back. “Will and I could referee while you and Dr Lecter drink tea and politely try and outwit one another.”

“You’re incorrigible,” says Alana fondly. “Especially considering you’ve already outwitted the pair of them – without them even realising it.”

“I know, poor little lads. Come to bed now dearest it’s late. At least, it’s not as late as all that…but do come to bed.”

So Alana laughs and stows away the sewing for another day, then takes hold of Margot’s hand as laughing and murmuring they begin to move upstairs; completely unaware, even in the quiet of the empty house and the silent street, of the relentless shriek of metal – piece by piece, one second after another – that betrays the sound of a lock being picked.

Chapter End Notes

Although it was never actually carried out, the job advert mentioned here was a strategy genuinely proposed by police in 1888. In his analysis of the case FBI profiler John

Douglas (see author notes in Chapter 2) was of the opinion that it might well have been successful.

Many thanks to Elwyngirlie for reminding me of the Victorian fascination with dualism re. Jekyll and Hyde. On the other hand, The Picture of Dorian Gray wasn't published until two years after this story is set (and never appeared as a serial), but about 90% of my historical literary references so far have been bullshit so I thought it was a shame to break the trend ;-D

In other news, this week I've been talking to my Sherlock-watching friend who felt very annoyed over S4 being rubbish.

Her: So John beat Sherlock up, it was awful.

Me: Oh dear, I know what you mean. One half of our OTP was basically: "I'm going to saw your head open," and the other was all like: "Fine, whatever, I'm going to throw you off a cliff."

[*Awkward silence*]

Her: Right. Actually, speaking of Hannibal…

Me: Yes yes yes.

Her: …There was a real Silence of the Lambs vibe to the Sherlock finale – they could pretty much have put Hannibal Lecter in the next cell. Plus the villains practically got to first base through a glass screen and it all happened in this weird Shutter Island-type place.

Me: [*Taking notes for future fic ideas*] "Makes out through glass screen on Shutter Island…"

Her: All they needed was an FBI profiler and it would have been a crossover.

Me: OMG I would watch the shit out of that show.

[*Awkward silence*]

Her: Right.

Me: Damn right.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> I was staying with my friend last week who told me about THIS. In the name of Our Lord and Saviour Bryan Fuller, how has it taken me seven years to find out about it? It's got a murder family and everything. Best quote: “He is an absolutely horrible swan and people really don’t like him. ~~But he was only cross because he thought the other swans were flirting with his husband~~.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The house is incredibly quiet when Will arrives. Almost unfeasibly so in fact – to the extent it becomes unsettling – as if the bland, placid exterior is a deliberate mockery of his seething agitation. Blank, black windows with snugly drawn curtains. The gate fastened tight, just as it always is. Nothing to see, nothing to notice at all, and the only sound the creaking of the wind with a corresponding jangle from the wind chimes above the front door. Margot always found the tinkling bells somewhat pointless and it was Alana who wanted them there; he can remember watching her hanging them, balanced on a stool and smiling down when he asked her if she needed any help. At the time they seemed such a quaint, harmless thing and yet there’s something about the noise which now strikes him as melancholy and ominous and makes him long to tear them down and trample them into silence.

Will takes a few seconds to catch his breath then flings the gate open and runs down the path, fumbling in his coat for the key as he goes and nearly wailing with horror that he’s left it at Harley Street before locating it at the very bottom of his pocket. The garden, so neat and pretty in daylight hours, now looks drained and spectral in the moonlight: the trees straggling into the sky with black naked limbs and the painted tubs of geraniums acquiring a hunched, lurking aspect like packs of gnomes or goblins. He slips the key into the lock then turns the latch as quietly as possible, freezing rigid at the sound of footsteps before realising it’s only his own heartbeat, pounding out crazed and wild in his ears. Then he catches sight of his hands on the doorframe, pearly pale in the moonlight, and for a few miserable seconds is completely crushed by how frail and useless they seem; how hopelessly inadequate for the task ahead.

Hannibal, gazing into Will’s face with that unnervingly rapt stare. Constructing Will’s whole philosophy and purpose from nothing more than flickers of expression or a certain tone of voice, like an archaeologist assembling a prehistoric being from fragments of bone. ‘These hands of yours. There is so much ferocity in them. Isn’t there Will? All the things one can accomplish with one’s bare hands.’

But how can it have come to pass that Alana’s life, and Margot’s too, could now literally be in Will’s hands? There isn’t space for them there; the burden is too precious and unwieldly. Oh God, it’s unbearable that he underestimated Matthew Brown so badly. The stalking

prowling pursuit – the *relentlessness* of it – the palely feral face contorted with all the rage, relish and energy of resourceful infatuation. And yet it was always in or around the vicinity of Scotland Yard; how could Will possibly have known he'd be tracked to Camden Place (fuck that, he *ought* to have known). In turn it means he's almost certainly been followed as far as Harley Street, and the thought of Matthew having any kind of access to Hannibal literally makes him snarl with rage. For a few seconds he feels crushed by the weight of the responsibility – both for resolving the situation and for causing it to happen in the first place – then forces himself to focus and reaches into his pocket for the blunt, reassuring nub of the revolver.

The corridor is completely silent and endlessly black as he slips inside. Surely it wasn't so black when he lived here? Or so very, very silent. '*As silent as the grave*.' Isn't that something people say; he's certain he's read it somewhere… *'deathly quiet*,' oh Christ. Trying to balance speed with subtlety Will edges towards the stairs, straining his ears for any signs of life (but not the other thing, please God not that) and determined to retain the elements of surprise and ambush which feel like the main advantages still available to him. Then he creeps along the winding staircase and it's not until he's halfway up that he finally hears what he was hoping for so desperately: the voices of Alana and Margot. They're too muffled to clearly decipher the words, but undeniably theirs nonetheless; and so obviously healthy and whole. Their speech is punctuated by a lower humming noise – a male voice – to the extent it sounds like some kind of discordant musical piece: two violins intercut with a rumbling bass.

Will reaches the landing with the same silent tread and follows the sound down the corridor to where he can see a light flickering from underneath the door – and the sight of it makes him hiss with frustration because a closed door means announcing his entrance and renders a silent attack impossible. But there's no help for it because what else is there to be done? *Nothing*, thinks Will with a sudden rush of despair. *There's nothing else*. So he takes a deep breath to steady himself and then abruptly throws it open, squinting for a few seconds in the face of so much light after so much darkness.

The first thing he sees is Alana and Margot, sitting on the bed with their hands clasped and wearing nightgowns and shawls with their hair loose down their backs. Matthew Brown is stood directly opposite, brandishing a large ugly knife with a serrated blade and with an unmistakable flush of excitement that mottles itself in red blotches across both cheekbones and makes the dark eyes gleam as they twitch and roil around in their sockets.

"Oh *Will*," says Alana. Her tone is something like relief and fear threaded through with anger and Will has no idea if the latter's directed at him. It probably is – he can hardly blame her.

"And here he is!" crows Matthew Brown. "Well done Mr Graham. I knew you'd figure it out."

Will's instincts in that moment are deeply chaotic, tumbling and churning together at painful odds with one another. He wants to fling himself at Alana and Margot's feet and beg their forgiveness; he wants to have them reassure and absolve him; he wants to seize Matthew Brown's gloating face with its oily triumphant sheen and smash it against the floorboards until it shatters and disintegrates and he can grind the pulp of it into the splintery wood with his foot. He wants to offer comfort, and receive consolation, and he wants to rend and tear

and reprimand, and of course all these things are impossible in the present moment – although somehow still more feasible compared with what he actually *has* to do; which is keep a clear head and establish a measure of control over the situation. “Yeah, I figured it out,” he replies in a voice that, by a miracle of application, comes out as reasonably steady and self-possessed. “And I came. And now…” He’s about to add ‘*I want you to let them go’* but changes his mind at the last minute; better to phrase it as a command than a request. “And now you’re going to let them leave and you and I can talk together – just like you always wanted.”

Matthew Brown darts his tongue across his lips then slowly tilts his head to one side, and there’s something curiously reptilian about the gesture that makes Will want to shudder. “What do you think ladies?” he says, turning to Alana and Margot. “What would you do if you were me?” The tone is leisurely, soaked through with an unctuous civility that makes the situation border on surreal – as if he thinks he’s at some kind of suburban tea party and is politely asking his hostess’s opinion about the weather. “Do you think Mr Graham makes a good point?”

Margot opens her mouth defiantly, eyes flashing with anger, and Will sees the way Alana places a steadying hand on her knee. “I think he does, yes,” she replies after a small pause, and Will privately marvels at how incredibly controlled she manages to sound. “This is nothing to do with us. You have no right to keep us here.”

“I suppose I don’t,” replies Matthew Brown, almost thoughtfully. “But the problem for you, ma’am, is that there’s not a lot you can do to stop me. So even if I don’t have the right, I guess I’ve still got the privilege.” He switches the knife from his right hand to the left then raises it up to tip his hat back with the blade like a grotesque parody of a vaudeville act. Margot gives a visible wince of contempt. “You know, this is really all your fault Mr Graham; I asked you so nicely and so often – so many times. Look what you’ve made me do to get your attention.”

“So you’ve got my attention,” replies Will levelly. *I swear to God, you evil fucker, you have no idea how much you’re going to regret this*. “Now let them go.”

“But I’m not sure if I will Mr Graham,” says Matthew. “Seeing how much trouble it was to get them in the first place. Do y’know what I mean?” He grins at Will then shoots out a pale hand and takes hold of a few strands of Alana’s hair, idly twirling it through his fingers like a child playing cat’s cradle.

“All right, that’s *enough*.” Will tightens his grip on the gun and then holds it straight out in front of him with both hands. “Put down the knife.” And then when Matthew doesn’t respond: “Do it *now*.”

“Thanks for the suggestion Mr Graham, but I really don’t think I will. And I know you’re not going to pull that trigger because there’s a risk you might hit one of these nice ladies. You don’t have a clear shot do you? It’s a real shame.” He throws Will another long leering smile then suddenly jerks forward towards the bed, his movement so disjointed and crawling that in the flickering light of the fireplace he looks like a giant insect. The blade of the knife catches the firelight too, and for a few nightmarish moments it’s all crawling shadows and flashes of silver before Alana screams as Matthew begins to tug her backwards by the hair.

"*No!*" shouts Will.

He makes a desperate dash forward, heart racing and blood pounding – but Margot is far too quick for him. With a reflex that seems almost supernatural in precision she leaps towards Matthew's legs before Will is even halfway across the room, knocking him to the side to enable Alana to duck out the way of the crazily swinging knife. The speed, resolution and complete lack of fear is striking – like a tigress defending her cubs – and in those few fleeting seconds Will finally sees it; sees it all. *You love her*, he thinks. *You love her so much it's stronger than death*. *And she loves you just as fiercely as you love her*. And he knows, with a sickening plunge, that it's something he's been conditioned to feel such shame about in himself that it was impossible to recognise it in other people; people that he cares about, respects and admires. *I'm sorry*, he wants to say, *I'm sorry I erased you. That I didn't see you. But I see you now*. And then he blinks and the moment is over – and instead he's back in the room and the present moment, in which Alana has wrenched herself free and delivered a stinging punch to the face of Matthew Brown that's sent him staggering backwards just as Margot seizes a pitcher from the bedside table and pivots it through the air with a kind of balletic grace before smashing it straight across his forehead.

"Bitch!" screams Matthew, clutching his face as the blood begins to seep between his fingers.

"You vile little man," hisses Margot in return, who's actually bearing her teeth, just as Alana snarls: "*Get out of our house*."

For a few seconds Matthew Browns flails in mid-air, clearly desperate to retaliate, before seeing that Will is plunging towards him. For a few seconds he flicks his eyes across the three of them as if calculating the odds; and then, on deciding the game is clearly up, promptly recruits his customary slippery cunning to duck beneath Will's outstretched arm and make a desperate dash for the open door. Will swerves sharply backwards himself then gives an involuntary yell as Matthew wrenches round and flings over the bookcase on the landing, forcing him to lose precious seconds in jumping over the bulky wooden slats before he can charge down the stairs and into the street in pursuit. The whole thing has a confused nightmarish quality to it that even Will, veteran of countless disturbing situations, finds horribly debilitating. It's the darkness and the helplessness; the breathy grunting sounds Matthew Brown is making, like something feral and inhuman; and it's the way the moonlight and fog swallow them both up into a ghoulish, ghost-grey covering that stings the skin and curdles in the throat as Matthew stumbles out into the road and Will sprints after him. Courtesy of Alana and Margot he has an obvious limp in his right leg, and in spite of the fear and uncertainty Will feels a powerful flare of triumph that this time – this time, *finally* – he's not going to get away.

"Come on Mr Graham!" calls Matthew, his voice thin and shrill in the silent air. "I know you want me! We both want this, we've been waiting for it. We've been *waiting*."

Will grits his teeth and puts on an additional spurt, his footsteps echoing in tandem with Matthew's as they race across the icy cobblestones before eventually rounding up on him in the narrow alleyway that flanks the side of Camden Place. It's a wretched spot, even in the daytime: everything wrecked and reeking, coated in the type of straggling vegetation that spontaneously appears on debris and damp, and with a level of decayed abandonment that

could double for a churchyard or crypt. Matthew is panting heavily, his face pale and bleached in the moonlight, and Will knows his own must look the same: two solitary wraiths confronting one another. Two lost souls.

"So here we are," says Matthew after a pause. "Very good Mr Graham." He barks out a laugh and tips his head back towards the sky before snapping upright again and facing Will directly; there's a trickle of blood running down his face and he wipes it away with the hand that's still clutching the knife. "*Very* good. I knew I hadn't underestimated you. It's like I always said – like I've been telling you from the beginning."

"What?" asks Will quietly, even though he's not entirely sure he wants to know.

"You and me; we're hawks Mr Graham." He takes a slow swaying step to the left and Will does the same, moving in parallel as if they're engaged in some sort of yearning *danse macabre.* The motion causes their silhouettes to splash across the ground like spilled ink that soaks and mingles into one another at the edges and on noticing it Will automatically moves away, reluctant to concede any kind of commonality. "Hawks are solitary," adds Matthew in the same eerily crooning voice. "That's their weakness. Have you seen the way that smaller birds will mob a hawk sat on a line? Enough of those smaller birds get together and they chase the hawks away. Imagine if the hawks started working together?" His teeth gleam in the moonlight as he smiles at Will, breath seeping out in little frozen puffs. "Do you see Mr Graham? Do you understand? People don't understand much about me. Or about you. But at least we understand each other."

"I don't understand it all," replies Will. "Not yet." He swallows then makes an effort to sound calmer; more controlled and appraising, the way Hannibal would if he were here. "But I want to – I want you to explain it to me."

"What?" asks Matthew and there's an underlying eagerness in the tone – the fervent desire to be both an object of interest and a means of service – that in spite of everything suddenly strikes Will as deeply pitiful. Even so he can't quite bring himself to blurt out '*Are you Jack the Ripper?*' so opts for a more convoluted line of enquiry and asks about Freddy Lounds instead (because it surely amounts to one and the same?), carefully watching every flicker of expression as he describes the slaughter house scene at Fleet Street.

"The *journalist*?" interrupts Matthew impatiently, obviously disappointed that Will has chosen to pursue something so impersonal. "Why would you think I'd care about that?" He frowns, suddenly petulant again, and the irritated disinterest is so pronounced that Will immediately knows, with a sinking disappointment of his own, that his initial instinct was correct and that whatever else Matthew Brown might be a serial murderer of East End women isn't one of them. Taken together the clear indifference, combined with his look of confusion, is enough to convince Will that he's telling the truth; a look which rapidly clears when the crooked little smile begins to reappear as he adds: "Oh I *see*. That conversation in the art gallery…you thought I was the Ripper didn't you?"

Will is grudgingly impressed that this intuitive leap has been made so quickly: the twitching, servile exterior notwithstanding, Matthew Brown is clearly by no means stupid. "I thought you could be," he says after a pause.

For a few seconds there's complete silence, then Matthew Brown emits a high-pitched giggling noise as if Will has made the most marvellous joke imaginable. "Sorry to disappoint you Mr Graham. But Jack the *Ripper*?" Now he sounds incredulous – almost offended – and Will raises his eyebrows as a silent invitation to elaborate. "I mean, really – who is he?" adds Matthew. "Just some sordid, second-rate killer of whores. Together we could be something so much more than that. You and me. Do you like the sound of that Mr Graham? You know I'm right. The whole *world* would take notice of us." He takes a deliberate step closer, renewing the deranged giggling sound as Will's hand flies to his pocket to retrieve the gun. "Oh Mr Graham," says Matthew, defiantly moving closer still. "Not this *again*. You know you're not going to shoot me."

"Am I not?" replies Will, who's growing deeply unnerved and only just managing to hide it. "I suggest you don't keep pushing me to find out."

"Of course you're not *Will*," replies Matthew. He takes another step forward, his voice dropping down to a lower, gravelly register that manages to be even more disturbing than the coy playfulness of previously. The knife, still gripped in his right fist, flashes in the moonlight as if it's winking and grinning in sympathy with its owner and Will has to tighten his grip on the gun to conceal the fact his hands have begun to shake. "You're too frightened to shoot me. Look at you. You're *terrified*. You're trying not to show it but I can tell. I *understand* you." He lifts his face and delicately sways it in the air as if breathing Will in. "Some animals can smell fear Mr Graham. Did you know that?" He breathes in again and Will has a sudden image of Hannibal, so highly attuned to smell and sense and sensation. *If you ever go near him*, he silently telegraphs to Matthew Brown, *then I'll kill you, you bastard. I'll fucking kill you*.

"Strength in numbers Mr Graham," murmurs Matthew, taking another step forward. He's near enough now to touch Will – all he'd have to do is raise one of those pale spidery hands. "Unity through purpose. You and me, sat on our line. Just like the hawks."

"If you come any closer," says Will in a flat mechanical voice, "then I'll kill you."

"So do it." Matthew's teeth are gleaming again in the moonlight, matching both the rolling whites of his eyes as he stares fixedly at Will and the silvery slice of knife blade as he brandishes it in front of him: knife-teeth-eyes, edging up all the time. "You know you can't. You know you won't. You know we belong on the same side." It sounds like a chant or a mantra: an article of faith. *Matthew Brown and Will Graham, bound together 'til death do us part,* and the unspoken implication of it makes Will give another involuntary flinch. "We belong together. *You belong to me.*"

"*Stop. Right. There*," hisses Will. Then he draws in a deep breath, icy painful in the freezing air, and adjusts his aim to the left to fire a warning shot. There's a brief moment of silence; and for the rest of his life, Will knows he's never going to forget the sick lunge of horror as his finger clicks back…and absolutely nothing happens. It's impossible – inconceivable – but the bullets are no longer in the gun.

"Oh dear, Mr Graham," says Matthew softly.

Will finally releases the long breath that he hadn't even realised he'd been holding and then slowly, almost trance-like, lowers his arm and replaces the gun in his pocket before squaring his shoulders and looking Matthew Brown straight in the eye. It's a profoundly odd sensation, as if he's taken a step sideways out of time and is poised and hovering at the side of the alleyway: watching himself and waiting. Because now that the absolute worst has happened he feels strangely calm, and Hannibal's endless lectures about duality writhe around his mind as the frightened horrified part discreetly slips away and someone else arrives instead.

"So what happens now?" asks Matthew. The tone is insinuating, almost tender. "*What are you going to do*?"

I'm going to kill you, thinks Will, calmly detached. He can hear his pulse in his ears, the roar of blood, and he supposes it's inevitable because there's really no help for it now; there's nothing else left. It has to be quick and efficient – skin against skin; strangely intimate – erase the restrictions of physical distance and mental detachment, and maintain control even in the ecstasy of losing it. Righteous, rebellious, redolent with the alchemy of transformation…and done with his own bare hands. Yet at the same time he also knows, deep down – deep, deep down in the dark shadowy places – that Matthew hasn't expressed an intention to harm him and what he's about to do isn't truly self-defence. He supposes he could try and justify it in other ways: that Matthew deserves it, that it's punishment for crimes previously perpetrated, or destined to be committed in the future, or that Will is protecting Hannibal, Alana and Margot; that it's the *right* thing to do. He supposes he could say that, if he wanted. If he really believed it. And even if he did, even if he knew it wasn't a lie, the one other thing he knows beyond all reasonable doubt is that after tonight nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Will Graham takes a deep breath then steps forward: the irrevocable sense of a line being crossed.

And then he arches his back and he springs, supple and fearless with the lean leonine grace of any predator as Matthew Brown gives a shout of genuine distress and flails backwards, the knife catching Will with a glancing blow to the chest that fails to penetrate the thick material of his coat. Together they crash down onto the glistening frozen cobblestones and to Will there's a certain savage grace to it. He's always thought so; how swiftly, simply and beautifully a human body can be breached and broken apart. The sense of life and soul even in the midst of dying. *Here* the exhilaration; *there* the sense of reckoning. The knowledge that justice can be meted out anywhere – in books or plays, the hallowed lofty spires of the Old Bailey, or the filth and abandonment of a back alley. And the rush and the righteousness, and the power and purpose…and the way that the blood looks black in the moonlight.

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Across the other side of London Hannibal is sat in Harley Street, calm and composed in front of the fireplace and with nothing to disturb him except the crackle of the flames and the pattering of sleet against the window as he engages himself with drawing Will. Numerous variations of these pictures exist, some of which are taken from life (deep in sleep and draped across the sofa, oblivious of the moment being captured for posterity), some from memory (arriving on the doorstep for the very first time, hands in his pockets and a defiant stare) and some of which are plucked purely from imagination (running or fighting or crouching or

pouncing, yet always victorious and glowing with all the grace and fierceness of a young Grecian warrior). There is monochrome Will, stark and uncompromising in charcoal or pencil, and technicolour Will rendered richly in pastel or crayons; and when Hannibal finally obtains the time and privacy to execute it, fully intends for there to be Will depicted gloriously on canvas with swathes of expensively creamy oil paint that are lavishly and liberally applied. Not, of course, that any of these hues or tints can ever truly capture the vibrant splendour of the original. '*Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along his throat*' quotes Hannibal to himself with a slight smirk. He pauses for a few seconds and runs his eye across the paper, then adds some pencil strokes to lengthen the line of Will's jaw and deepen the frown line between his eyebrows, lending a brutal grimness and determination to the expression that's only rarely displayed in real life.

From outside the consulting room comes the sound of the front door opening and Hannibal glances up expectantly before beginning to frown himself as he detects a clear hint of distress in Mary's voice. Even with his fox-like hearing it's impossible to decipher the actual words but the anguished tone is unmistakable; and Hannibal quickly stows away his sketchbook and gets to his feet, opening the door just in time to hear Will say: "I'm fine, I'm fine. It's not as bad as it looks."

"Oh *sir*," replies Mary plaintively. "Let me fetch Dr Lecter for you."

Hannibal slides into the corridor soundlessly enough, but is still immediately spotted by Will who takes a few steps towards him and then falters as if unsure how to proceed. Even in the flattering light of the candelabra, whose ambient glow has a tendency to hide a multitude of sins, his appearance is striking with coiled, pulsating tension: pale, wide-eyed and smeared in streaks of blood that daub his cheekbones like the war paint of some native warrior. Nevertheless what Hannibal notices more than anything else is his hands, which are bruised and torn and spattered with far more blood than his face. And such varieties of blood too: patches of flaking brown where it's begun to dry, clotted vermillion across the knuckles, splashes of scarlet on the wrists. Very briefly he meets Will's eye, who gives an almost imperceptible nod in return.

"Mary," says Hannibal without missing a beat. "A bowl of warm water please – add some tablespoons of salt."

"Yes sir," answers Mary who, for the first time ever, seems too upset and distracted to perform the usual curtsey. "Oh sir. Right away." She disappears towards the kitchen, darting the occasional anxious glance over her shoulder, and Hannibal waits until her footsteps have died away before taking a step closer.

"It's not all your blood is it Will?" he says softly.

The silence stretches out, then Will shakes his head and sags slightly, suddenly appearing exhausted and overcome before abruptly straightening up as Mary reappears bearing a porcelain bowl that steams invitingly as if it's full of soup. "Thank you so much," says Hannibal, taking it with one hand and politely but firmly shutting the consulting room door. Then he gently steers Will towards the desk and positions himself directly behind, wrapping his arms round him so he can take hold of Will's hands in his own and dip them into the bowl. Will, in turn, stares down rather numbly, watching the way the water turns red and how

their clasped hands merge together within it, fingers so tightly tangled that it's not immediately possible to tell whose are whose just by looking: where he begins and Hannibal ends.

Hannibal says nothing for a while, rhythmically stroking and cleaning Will's tattered skin before finally skimming his lips against the back of his neck. "Tell me Will," he says softly. "Did your heart race when you murdered him?"

There's no immediate response and so Hannibal lingers, watching and waiting and biding his time in mutual silence before Will replies in a voice that's low yet resolute: "Yes."

Hannibal smiles against Will's skin then tenderly entwines their fingers together once more as he strokes away the remains of the blood. "And how did you feel?"

Although Will's head droops down at the question, elegantly exhausted as a wilted flower, the return of pressure against Hannibal's hand is unmistakable. "I never felt as alive as when I was killing him."

"Then you owe him a debt. How shall you repay him?"

"He wasn't the Ripper," says Will after another pause. "I thought he might be...He could have been."

"So who was he?"

"You saw him yourself; the man in the art gallery."

"Oh yes," replies Hannibal softly. "The one you believed you were sending after Freddy Lounds."

"Only it turns out he wasn't responsible after all."

"Interesting, isn't it," muses Hannibal, who's genuinely intrigued by this. "How the arrow found its target nonetheless? Although it was never *truly* satisfying, was it Will? Removing Mr Lounds by someone else's hand was not the reckoning you promised yourself. Yet what a resolution you have found this evening." He briefly increases the pressure of his fingers and Will flinches with pain. "I always told you so; all the things one can accomplish with one's bare hands. Did you appreciate the intimacy of it?"

"Yes," says Will in the same low voice.

"*Yes*," repeats Hannibal. "It's less frightening than it used to be, isn't it?"

"It is – yes."

"The *closeness* of it all. The intimacy. I already see it in the way you respond to me: how your yearning for intimacy threatens your self-control and how you long to give yourself over to the rapture of losing it. The *ecstasy* of it – indulging all your darkest desires. They merge in ways that are corrupted, don't they? And yet remain so beautifully and artfully displayed."

“Beauty and horror,” says Will tonelessly.

“Indeed. Just as I have always said.”

“But I don’t understand,” adds Will, suddenly sounding wan and exhausted. “I loaded the gun. I *did*. How could it have been empty?”

“I suppose you must have forgotten.”

“No, it doesn’t make any sense. I’d almost say it was sabotage, except no one even knew I had it. No one except Mr Crawford and… ” Will hesitates then tries to turn round, just as Hannibal’s grip tightens to keep him in place. “You. You *didn’t*…?”

“Me?” says Hannibal calmly. “Of course not.” He slowly begins to rub his face against Will’s, the sharp cheekbones delicately painful. “You know you haven’t been yourself lately. So preoccupied. So tired. You know the way you’ve been forgetting things.”

“I…”

“Don’t you Will?” Hannibal ghosts his lips against Will’s temple. “*Mylimasis*.”

Will screws his eyes closed, soothed in spite of himself by the rhythmic voice that’s inviting him to believe what he desperately wants to be true. How can he not, after all, when it’s dangerous to push the suspicion too far. Like prodding at an open wound: first precarious, then painful, and then ultimately a possible source of infection, ruination and destruction. And it’s absurd besides (surely it is?), because there’s a world of difference between Hannibal encouraging Will to accept certain aspects of his nature and mind-set and actually engineering a situation for him to kill someone. He can’t truly accept that Hannibal would have done such a thing; or, more to the point, doesn’t *want* to accept it. Doesn’t want to believe, even for a second, even the time it takes for a heartbeat, that his trust, love, belief and sense of stability could have been so disastrously misplaced. It’s true, anyway. He *has* been forgetting things, and Hannibal *did* note there were no bullets in the gun when Will first showed it to him. In fact the more he thinks about it the more plausible it becomes that he never loaded it in the first place. It’s paranoid and hysterical to suggest otherwise…

“And aren’t you glad it was empty?” murmurs Hannibal as if reading his thoughts. “Sometimes fate must be cruel to be kind, just as we discussed. Perhaps, subconsciously, you *wanted* to forget. After all, a gunshot could hardly have instilled the realisations you’ve attained this evening. It needed the intimacy – it needed your bare hands. It’s not like it was in America, Will. You’re no longer suffocating in oblivion; now you are obliged to question your motives. To cultivate your urges as the inspirations they are.” He tightens his grip again and Will gives a small moan. “It wasn’t just Hobbs’ ghost that was haunting you, was it my love? It was the inevitability of there being a man so bad that killing him felt good.”

Will closes his eyes and lets his head fall back against Hannibal’s shoulder. “I know,” he says quietly.

“Of course you do. I told you Will, so many times: to constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict.”

“Although I hardly diminished the violence, did I?” replies Will bluntly. “I magnified it.”

“Naturally you did. ‘*William’*: the war deity and warrior. We established that some time ago, I believe. And now you have the extra battle scars to prove it. Tell me, what did you do with…” Hannibal pauses delicately and then brushes his lips against Will’s temple again, “your kill?”

This time Will hesitates for a few seconds before replying, as if disturbed by the choice of phrase yet reluctant to admit it. “I left him in an alleyway near Camden High Street,” he finally says. “There was a pub close by – a fairly rough looking one. The police will most likely assume it was a street brawl that went too far.”

“And so you don’t intend to confide in Jack Crawford,” observes Hannibal, already well aware of the reason not.

“No.”

“Because the state of the corpse is not going to support the premise of ‘reasonable force?”

Will hesitates again. “No.”

Hannibal rubs his face against Will’s hair then pulls his hands out the basin and levers him round so they’re facing one another. “It’s your nature Will,” he says quietly. “Embrace it; what other alternative do you have? You delight in wickedness and then berate yourself for the delight.”

“Not delight,” replies Will sharply. “Tolerate.”

“Oh yes, naturally. *Tolerate*,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice before adding, with a hint of suggestiveness: “You have not yet fully discovered the appetite.” He gazes fixedly into Will’s face, and in the end it’s Will who looks away first. Hannibal smiles very faintly then takes hold of his shoulders and manoeuvres him into a chair before lighting the gas lamp and retrieving a leather case from his desk drawer.

“What are you doing?” asks Will, who’s quickly growing too tired and preoccupied to make sense of anything much. Nevertheless it occurs to him, admittedly rather hazily, that the dynamic has shifted just as it’s done so many times before as the tension dissipates and something more innocuous takes its place. And he can’t decide whether it’s him that’s instigated it, or if it’s Hannibal, or whether they’ve both altered it together in silent mutual confederacy to pretend that everything’s conventional and well-adjusted rather than a Siren’s song of darkly twisted thrills.

“That cut on your face,” says Hannibal in a brisk doctorly tone, as if confirming that it's time to play-act normality once more. “It needs suturing. Tip your head back please.” Will obeys then flinches, hissing with pain as a strong-smelling liquid with a fiery sting is swabbed against his skin. “I know it hurts,” adds Hannibal gently. “I’m sorry. The tincture has analgesic properties so it should ease in a minute or two. Otherwise I’m afraid you’re going to have to grit your teeth.” He tilts Will’s head further back then strokes across his shoulders with his free hand. “Are you injured anywhere else?”

“No.”

“You are sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. He tried to stab me but the blade didn’t penetrate – thank God for your expensive coat.” Hannibal briefly tightens his grip on Will’s shoulder but doesn’t reply. “Ow. *Ow*. Jesus, that hurts.”

“I need to do it Will. Try and bear it a little longer.”

Will draws in a sharp intake of breath and Hannibal makes a soothing noise between his teeth. “Are you nearly done?”

“Very nearly. Although it’ll most likely scar I’m afraid.” He ties the thread and then reaches into the case for a small pair of surgical scissors and neatly snips the edge off. “At least your hair will hide the worst of it.”

Will asks if there’s a mirror to hand, so Hannibal fetches a pen tray from his desk which has a reflective base and holds it up to inspect the damage. “It’s not so bad,” says Will in surprise. “At least it won’t be now thanks to your repair job.” He twists his face from one side to another, admiring the meticulous row of tiny stitches. “You’re good at this aren’t you?”

“I do my best, I suppose. These days I rarely have the opportunity to practice.”

“I didn’t actually know you could suture.” Will squints at his reflection once more than swivels round in the chair and sinks forward so he can rest his face against Hannibal’s chest. “You trained as a surgeon then?”

“I have degrees in both medicine and surgery, yes,” replies Hannibal, beginning to stroke Will’s hair. “It’s less common to have both qualifications in England, although some universities are beginning to combine the two.”

“Why don’t you do it anymore?”

“Because I lost a patient,” replies Hannibal simply. “So I decided to transpose my efforts from the operating theatre to the consulting room instead. Now here I am.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Some aspects, yes.”

“Would you ever go back to it?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps one day.” Will yawns and slumps a bit further forwards, mumbling something unintelligible in response, and Hannibal takes hold of his hands and pulls him to his feet. “Come upstairs, you need some rest. And I must insist on you taking a bath.”

“I’ll do it in the morning. It’s my clothes that are dirty, not me.”

“No *mylimasis*,” says Hannibal in a slightly menacing voice that Will can’t remember hearing before. “You will do it now.”

“Why?” asks Will irritably.

“Because I can smell *him* on you.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” says Will, although the protest is a bit half-hearted and he still allows himself to be led upstairs by the hand and manoeuvred into the bathtub, where Hannibal climbs in behind him and washes his hair with castile soap that smells pleasantly of cloves before pulling him back against his chest.

“Your collar bones are still awful,” says Will, tucking his head beneath Hannibal’s chin. “Just so you know.”

“Yes, they are a constant source of torment aren’t they? I suppose I should intercede as peacekeeper to resolve hostilities, but it’s rather entertaining watching the three of you battle on a regular basis.” He caresses the side of Will’s face then trails his fingers his across his throat and Will makes a small, contented rumbling noise. “You sound like you’re purring,” says Hannibal in amusement.

“Shut up. I do not.”

Hannibal smirks and then begins to stroke Will’s shoulders to try and get him to make the same noise again. “I *don’t*,” says Will, with slightly less conviction.

“Of course you don’t,” replies Hannibal serenely.

“It’s not my fault, even if I *did*,” adds Will as Hannibal’s hands, still slippery from the soap, resume their languorous glide across his torso. “’S’nice.” In fact, Will decides, there’s something about being the focus of so much affectionate fascination that’s rather addictive. He’s felt that way for some time – has probably always felt it, ever since the first kinetic meeting when the air thrummed with intrigue and possibility. Those darkly piercing eyes gazing into Will’s: *We are like refugees from another time, you and I*. Fleetingly he thinks of the drug dens he sometimes had to scour through in Baltimore in search of suspects: the rapture and the ruin and the constant glassy-eyed conviction that it’s ‘just this *one* last time’ as the crooked figures blinked into the darkness and fantasised night after night that the fragile, lethal love they had crafted between themselves and the opium could last forever. Obsession. Craving. The one last fix that never was. And oh God, he’s getting so *incredibly* hard, how is that even possible? *I killed someone tonight,* thinks Will hazily. *Killed someone with my bare hands. I should care about that…Why don’t I care?* Then he closes his eyes and lets his head tip back against Hannibal’s shoulder, gasping as Hannibal begins to suck a delicate blooming bruise onto the side of his throat as his hands begin to move lower and lower. It’s so dark in here, only three candles; he can barely see a few feet in front of him. Can hardly see anything except the curls of steam rising up from the water like wraiths. Darkness and light.

Except it’s not as simple as that, thinks Will with a surge of defiance. It never was. There’s far more than just Light and Dark in the London alleyways, or the Baltimore opium dens, or

the bathroom of Harley Street in the dead of night. There are provocations and incitements, there's instinct, there's empathy and imagination, there's your own bare hands and what you need to do with them because there's no one else to do it for you. There's Matthew Brown, the man so bad that killing him felt good, and the way the heart pounds and the blood rushes, and how it looks black in the moonlight. There's the version of Will that sits in Jack Crawford's office and drinks tea in Alana's kitchen, and nods and smiles and pushes his glasses up with his forefinger. And then there's the one that only Hannibal seems able to fully understand: the dark twin from that night in front of the fireplace. Will imagines glancing up now and seeing him stood in the shadows by the door, lean and watchful with the blood still on his face and the tattered gore-stained hands. Will's haunted self: burning with native fire and fuelled with natural passion, whose spirit is perfectly realised, whose virtues and vices are entirely his own, and who is unashamed and unafraid and concedes to *no one*.

For a few seconds Will feels a distinct surge of panic, bleach-boned, blackened and bloodied, and tattered around the edges like feathers and tar. Then he abruptly snaps his eyes open and pulls himself up, turning round so he's straddling Hannibal's knee and gazing straight into his face. And Hannibal, unusually, remains completely silent – merely raising a hand so he can trail a single finger down Will's face and across his lower lip.

"Let's go to bed," says Will quietly.

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Will isn't entirely aware of how they make it to the bedroom although they've obviously managed it somehow. But he's keenly aware of falling backwards onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, the mutual loss of balance and mooring, and of the way he's twining himself around Hannibal like ivy on a statue; all teeth and tongue and panting, helpless desire. And he's aware of trailing his hands down the long curve of Hannibal's spine and across his shoulder blades, caressing along his arms, stroking over his chest; and how even though his eyes are closed the whole time, he's completely aware of the way each touch is instinctive – unseeing yet intuitive – because he feels like he doesn't need to watch what he's doing. *I just know – I know you*, thinks Will with a simplicity that's both striking and heartfelt. *The same way you know me*.

"Will," murmurs Hannibal, very low and soft. "Beloved. *Mano meilė*."

Will makes a breathy moaning noise at the mere sound of Hannibal's voice then presses his face against his chest. "Please," he can hear himself saying, "I need this, I *need* it, I need you" – and in those few moments he feels more vulnerable and yearning than he would have thought himself capable of. With anyone else he'd probably feel angry or humiliated by it; he'd regret it immediately, he'd try to take it back. But right now he doesn't care. He's losing himself in this – losing, lost, uncovered, undone – and he doesn't care, it doesn't matter. Oh God, it doesn't *matter.* Not anymore.

Hannibal's eyes are now boring into Will's and it should probably feel too intense, staring at one another like this; it should be too much. But it's not. Will groans slightly, grinding his hips against Hannibal's and completely consumed with a sense of pleasure that extends far beyond desire. Because it *does*, it's more than that – so much more. It's wanting to taste his object of devotion, to inhale it, breathe it in and out, consume it, possess it, protect it; make it

his. And it doesn't frighten him, wanting someone this much. Perhaps it might have in the past, almost certainly it would, but not now; not tonight, not in this room or this bed. Once it would have been light-headed panic, shamed self-consciousness and wanting to hide in the shadows and cover his face. Now he feels secure and sensuous – audacious – naked and battle-stained and illuminated in the moonlight while filled with a sudden flare of pride and self-acceptance that's both complete and absolute. Then he gasps again and fumbles on the bedside table for the bottle of oil, knocking over a picture frame in the process and completely oblivious to the sound of breaking glass, before bending down to bury his mouth in Hannibal's, roughly pushing his legs apart with his free hand and breaking away at intervals to gasp out: "Please…I want to…would you let me?"

Hannibal sighs into Will's mouth as their tongues slide together and smooths his palms up and down Will's back, moving lower each time before reaching up to his face: stroking his cheekbones, rubbing his thumb against his jaw and finally sliding a finger into his mouth, which Will sucks on almost wantonly. "Of course *mylimasis*," says Hannibal in an unusually tender voice. "Whatever you want."

His lips look swollen from where Will's been kissing him and Will gazes back, panting slightly with flushed damp skin and pupils blown wide. *Oh God*, he thinks, rather helplessly. *You're so stunning. You're perfect. Look at you; look at yourself*. Beautifully fine-boned and fierce: planed angles, powerful muscles and dark piercing eyes. Cutting remarks, cold stares and a coiled lethal energy; yet also soft smiles with gentle questions and faultless instinct, a deft delicate touch, an artist's hands; a sense of yearning, of quiet loneliness, and '*If I saw you everyday forever, Will, I would remember this time*.' For a few seconds he feels so in love in can't think, then he leans down and runs his tongue across Hannibal's throat, interspersing open mouth kisses with delicate licks and the occasional hint of teeth. "*You*," he whispers into Hannibal's skin, "you're so…" Even though he can't think of the right term (what is it?), because in many ways Hannibal defies classification; even words can't get the better of him. He's just so…unique. One-of-a-kind. Will ultimately settles for the obvious instead and murmurs "I want you *so* much," then concentrates on working the bottle of oil open with his free hand while Hannibal stokes his arms and chest with a touch that's possessive and reverential yet still light enough to feel tantalising, making Will shiver and immediately want more. He's slightly too cold but it doesn't matter because it's making his skin more sensitive and heightens the sensation of Hannibal's fingertips, brushing over him like feathers. It's exhilarating – incendiary – as if the air is crackling with desire like the onset of a thunderstorm.

"Stay on your back," orders Will, low and intense. "I want to see you. Would you do that for me?" He's anticipating an objection of some kind (considering how impossible it generally is to persuade Hannibal to do anything he didn't first suggest himself) but contrary to expectation Hannibal simply smiles at Will, soft and sincere – tender, in fact – yet slightly rapt as well, as if the sight of him is too captivating to turn away from. Then he resumes the gentle stroke of fingers along Will's arms and Will, in turn, finds himself beginning to quiver with the intensity of it all and it takes him a few seconds to lever the lid off the oil (spilling some of it in the process) before starting to kiss his way down Hannibal's thigh. He's madly aware of how hot and heavy his cock has started to feel, the way it's glistening with a steady stream of pre-come, and he moves upright and circles his hips against Hannibal's legs so he can feel it too; so he can know how much Will wants him, that he wants him *all the time*. And

while there's no denying that Will's bringing far more enthusiasm than skill to the whole encounter, he's grown far too excited to care much about it one way or the other. And besides, what possible better person to learn from? On an impulse he takes hold of Hannibal's hand and kisses the back of it then crouches down and slides his tongue along the length of his cock, which is flushed and hard and lying flat along his stomach, wet and delicious at the tip. Hannibal make a sighing sound that's so low it's almost a hiss and Will sighs too then slowly begins to work a finger inside him, then two, circling his thumb outside to match the rhythm while trying to remember and re-enact the way that Hannibal touches him – how it never feels like preparation, laboured through as a necessary chore, but rather something pleasurable in and of itself to appreciate and linger over.

"Oh *yes*," says Will when Hannibal sighs again. "I want this so much, *fuck*, you've no idea." He withdraws his fingers almost entirely, caressing and rubbing with slick, teasing strokes before gliding back in until his hand is flush against Hannibal's body and then does it again, and again – and while he's hardly expecting him to moan and scream the whole way through it like Will would himself (and he doesn't), Will can still tell that he likes it from the way his breath speeds up and he arches his back. The sight of it is intoxicating, and Will gasps again too, levering forward so he can tug on Hannibal's bottom lip with his teeth and stab his tongue into his mouth before frantically kissing his way down his throat. Hannibal tips his head back to give him better access.

"There you go," says Will softly. He presses his fingers upwards and is rewarded with a sharp intake of breath. "Does that feel good?"

"Perfect." Hannibal pushes back against Will's hand as his breath hitches again. *Oh God*, thinks Will wildly, *I could listen to you doing that forever*. "But it always does with you."

Will hums in agreement then leans back on his heels to give his arm more leverage, wondering whether he should try adding a third finger before being overcome with a sudden surge of daring and dipping his head down so he can cling onto Hannibal's thigh with his free hand and begin to lap his tongue around the smooth, slippery skin where he's fingering him open with the other. This time Hannibal actually does moan, and the sound of it is so captivating that it drives Will slightly wild and begin to grind his mouth against Hannibal's body – sensuous, shameless and ecstatic – experimenting with warmly wet kisses, hard swipes and passionate licks and consumed with an urge to hear Hannibal make the same noise all over again before finally pulling away and using his knee to roughly push Hannibal's long legs further apart.

"God, you feel *so* good," says Will breathlessly. "You're so ready aren't you? Tell me you want it."

Rather than answering Hannibal hooks his feet round Will's back and tugs him forward, which makes Will reflect (somewhat wryly) that even in circumstances like these Hannibal is never going to condescend to actually *ask* for anything. He's never going to beg in the same way Will sometimes does, although it's obvious he wants it all the same because his whole body is giving him away: tilting his hips, arching his back, and gazing fixedly at Will with a stare that's heavy-lidded with raw desire. He wants it as much as Will; and Will, in turn, wants it so badly that he's almost reluctant to proceed simply because once he does then it'll

be over and can never occur again – the experience of taking Hannibal for the first time: it can only ever happen once. He wants to draw it out, make it last. But that's only in theory and in practice it's something else entirely; and so Will draws in a shuddering breath and then lines up and pushes forward so he can sink his cock into the tight velvety heat of Hannibal's body in one hard thrust.

"Oh *yes*," gasps Will. He sounds almost shocked as he gasps out loud again, sliding in so sweetly and easily and vaguely aware of the rapturous way Hannibal is murmuring his name as he arches up beneath him. "You're so…oh God, that's…that's…"

"You look beautiful," says Hannibal, and his breath catches slightly. "So beautiful, Will."

"You feel…*God*. Oh fuck, that's so good. I can't…" Will is still kneeling upright and the distance feels too much so he drops forward to rest his weight on his elbow, stroking Hannibal's face with the other hand before searching out his mouth to kiss him again, deeply and thoroughly, pulling away at intervals to tell him how good it feels or to gasp out his name. Their limbs are sliding together as the movement becomes more heated and urgent, warm sweat-slick skin and sensation, and Will rocks his hips and moans at the feeling of Hannibal's cock, impossibly slick and hard, as it presses against his abdomen each time he pushes down. Hannibal, he decides, looks amazing like this; the way he comes alive during sex – still graceful but with a molten, unrestrained energy that's not always apparent at other times. His hands seem to be everywhere at once, skimming up and down Will's spine, trailing across his waist, caressing his face; and the touch is so warm and firm, and Will's skin feels so sensitive, that he ends up gasping in a rather desperate way because it's too much to process and there are no words, no language, no way to properly explain it. Oh God, they're being so loud – the noises they're making, the way the bed frame is being flung against the wall – and if any of the servants are awake on the floor above then they'll be in no doubt as to *exactly* what the two of them are doing. And in that single ecstatic moment Will doesn't care, he couldn't care less: fuck them, let them hear. Let them know – let *everyone* know.

In fact Will can barely breathe now; his heart's thundering in his chest and his muscles are stinging but the desire is so powerful that he barely notices it as he grips hold of Hannibal's wrists and pins him down against the bed, thrusting so hard he can feel Hannibal's sharp hipbones digging into his skin as the previous tender yearning is ripped away and replaced by something rougher and rawer. Something's that's wild and passionate and frantic and urgent, and at points almost harshly aggressive; although the force isn't channelled from an intention to harm but from a desire to love. It's the energy that comes from fervour – from the need to demonstrate devotion – and Hannibal grinds his hips upwards to meet Will's and chants his name with an imploring, fervid earnestness that sounds like the word of a prayer as Will makes a high desperate noise that's almost a wail and tips his head back, his whole body trembling and contracting with the first sharp waves of pleasure which are building up and threatening to take him down. Although even as he's chasing towards orgasm he doesn't entirely want it – not yet, not *quite* yet – because he doesn't want this to ever be over. Then he's so overwhelmed that he briefly loses synch with how Hannibal's moving and the rhythm falters, but somehow manages to find an equilibrium regardless even though the balance is an intricate one because he needs to be grounded and steadied whereas Hannibal needs to be taken out of himself. "Oh God," Will can hear himself saying, his voice pulling away from him. "I – I'm going to…oh…*oh*…"

Hannibal makes a low sound that's nearly a growl then hooks his legs round Will once again and pulls him forward, plunging his tongue into his mouth as Will gives a helpless moan. "That's it," he murmurs, low and intense. "My beautiful boy. I want you to come for me. *Now*. I want to see it."

He swipes his tongue along Will's throat then releases his grip a little to give Will more movement; and for few seconds it's simply face to face and heart to heart, with Hannibal's eyes locked into Will's and Will's pulse racing above Hannibal's. And then Will is dizzily aware of someone saying '*I'll never not want this*' at the exact moment the other says '*I'll never stop wanting you*' – and he doesn't even know which one of them made which pledge, only that for those few feverish frantic seconds the level of connection between them is so intense and all-consuming it's almost frightening. He can literally feel Hannibal's body tightening round him and his own movement has grown fraught and erratic as his hips start to stutter, and he knows then that they're going to come at the same time, they're going to go over the edge together in each other's arms, and that it's going to be perfect. And it is, oh God, it's perfect. Because they are, aren't they? The two of them together. They're *perfect*.

*****

Will is aware of feeling somewhat lightheaded afterwards – delirious, even – and ends up collapsing back against the pillows and staring drunkenly at the ceiling before cycling through a response set that begins with ragged panting, proceeds to something a bit like giggling, and finally culminates in a series of staccato exclamations along the lines of: "Oh God. Oh my God, that was…*God*. Fucking hell."

"Eloquent, Will," replies Hannibal with a smile.

"Well it *was*."

"It was."

"*God*," repeats Will.

"Although what has God got to do with it really? I would suggest leaving Him out of it for the time being."

"Shut up Hannibal," says Will amicably.

"Granted, I suppose He does have a tendency to insinuate Himself where He is not wanted – here as with so much else."

"Seriously though," says Will, pretending to bite Hannibal's shoulder, "do shut up. Why can't we just have a nice, non-philosophical, non-theological post-coital moment like normal people?"

"Because we are not normal," replies Hannibal, not sounding remotely concerned about it. Will gives a snort of laughter then rolls onto his side and rests his head on Hannibal's chest, who begins to stroke his hair before adding: "Any other religious revelations to get out your system?"

“No, I think I'm done now.”

“Glory be.”

“Oh *do* shut up,” says Will, reaching his arm round so Hannibal can tangle their fingers together. “Anyway, if memory serves you seemed pretty enraptured yourself at the time.” He pauses a few seconds and then gives Hannibal’s hand a tug. “Have you ever let anyone do that to you before?”

“Oh course not, *mylimasis*,” replies Hannibal blithely. “I was waiting for you.”

On reflection Will decides that he doesn’t *entirely* believe this; at least not when compared with the far more likely scenario of Hannibal experimenting with every conceivable sexual variant (including many Will’s never heard of, and no doubt in several different continents and time zones), but additionally decides that he doesn’t really care because surely it could never have happened before with such passionate sincerity? He idly begins to stroke a pattern onto Hannibal’s chest, something a bit like a fleur-de-lis with swooping curves and the occasional spiky contour, when Hannibal inadvertently brushes against the stitches and it hurts so much he gives a sharp intake of breath.

“Ah. I am sorry,” says Hannibal, making a regretful noise.

“It’s okay,” replies Will, although the pain is of an acuteness and intensity that drags him away from the previous dreamy thoughtfulness, out of bliss and back to reality. “I feel like I passed some sort of test tonight,” he adds abruptly.

“What do you mean?”

“That fight in the alleyway.”

“Oh?”

“God, I really did,” says Will. “It could have all gone so differently.”

“It could not. I had *no* doubt you would rise to such an occasion; no doubt at all.” He pauses and brushes his lips against Will’s forehead. “And that perhaps you needed an opportunity to prove it to yourself.”

“Hmm. Maybe…I don’t know. I was scared the whole time. At least I was at the beginning.”

“Remember what I told you about fear? That it is not a reason to cease and desist – rather the inspiration to strike out.”

“Maybe for you,” says Will. He hauls himself upright onto his elbows and then glances down, aware of the way Hannibal’s eyes are gleaming in the darkness like a cat’s. “I don’t always find it as simple as that.”

“Neither did I, at least not when I was much younger. Several things occurred since then to convince me to change my mind.” He doesn’t elaborate further and for a few seconds Will thinks he can hear a trace of something like sadness beneath the usual deadpan tone until

Hannibal speaks again and the calm delivery is so fully restored that he becomes convinced he imagined it. “So now I have arrived at my adulthood philosophy on fear,” adds Hannibal smoothly, “and I can recommend it to you *very* enthusiastically.”

“Freedom from fear,” replies Will with a slight laugh. “You’re relentless aren’t you? I sometimes think you don’t have any vulnerabilities at all. Not a single weak spot.”

“That is not entirely true.”

“So what are they then?”

There’s no reply and Will laughs again and begins to kiss his way down Hannibal’s chest; affectionate and playful and completely unaware of the way Hannibal is gazing fixedly into the darkness as he reflects on the true response to the question. One simple affirmation – a single word – yet so stark and resonant in his own mind, so powerful in the unavoidable truth of it, that it becomes impossible to admit it out loud. Just one, single, unsayable word: *You*.

*****

The next day is even more dour and gloomy than usual, with battalions of iron grey clouds rolling across the sky like troops going into battle and a wind that’s so sharp and cutting it might be an East End hustler’s flick knife. Will takes one look at it and despatches a note to Scotland Yard informing Jack Crawford that he’s ill and won’t be attending any meetings before taking refuge in bed and tugging the covers over his head. In this respect the bed, for once, is not actually Hannibal’s own because after some deliberation Will has finally taken him up on the offer of having the use of his own room. Ostensibly it’s for appearance’s sake for the benefit of any visitors, but the main reason is that, having been solitary for so much of his life, he’s still not accustomed to the lack of privacy and recourse to somewhere that’s completely *his* for a few hours a week has started to feel emotionally necessary. The room he’s chosen is a pleasant spacious one on the second floor with dark green walls, a high cream ceiling and a recurrence of art and furnishings that seem somewhat Eastern in style (Will suspects, but isn’t entirely sure, that there’s a Japanese influence somewhere) within which the exotic lure of The Orient combined with the stolid, suburban view from the windows appeals to his sense of the paradoxical. Nevertheless, and despite a need for solitude and private space, he still wakes up later that afternoon feeling lonely and anxious and resolves to get dressed and go and find Hannibal. It’s unseasonably cold so he stands shivering in front of the fireplace while pulling on his clothes before he catches sight of his reflection in the mirror and winces slightly. The row of stitches are raw and inflamed, he has the beginning of what promises to be a truly spectacular black eye, and his top lip is badly swollen from its prolonged exposure to the cobblestones the night before. Will sighs out loud, suddenly feeling self-conscious. He looks so *coarse*: vulgar and unrefined and completely out of place in all the rarefied elegance of his surroundings. And God only knows what Jack Crawford is going to say.

“You look like shit,” Will informs his reflection firmly, which continues to gaze back at him with a bleakly wan defiance as if telling him to fuck off. Will stares critically at the reflection for a few more seconds and the reflection stares critically back – at which point Will decides that there has to be more to life than gazing at your battered face in a mirror while telling yourself to fuck off, so finishes fastening his shirt and sets off downstairs instead.

Although Hannibal isn't in his consulting room the faint scratch of gramophone music from down the corridor gives away his location fairly quickly: basking on the drawing room sofa and looking unusually casual with his sleeves rolled up and the top few buttons on his shirt undone. He doesn't glance up from his book when Will comes in, but wordlessly lifts his arm as an invitation for Will to slot underneath it and lie next to him.

"What are you reading?" asks Will after a while, who's been scanning the pages and grown frustrated after failing to recognise the language.

"Some intriguing new research on vaccination."

"Hmm," says Will, promptly losing interest. "Actually, that reminds me – I keep meaning to ask you to lend me some medical books. There're some aspects of the coroner's reports I'd like to check."

"Of course, whenever you like. You know where I keep them." Hannibal finally puts the book down and tries to turn Will's face round to inspect the injuries, who promptly twists out the way. "Let me see."

"Don't. I look hideous."

"No," says Hannibal simply.

"Yes." Will ducks his face a bit further down, trying to think of a way of changing the subject. "I didn't know you had a gramophone. I've never seen one close up."

"Oh? Then I suppose your curiosity is getting the better of you…no doubt you are plotting to dismantle it to see how it works?"

"Could I?" asks Will, cheering up.

Hannibal laughs slightly and begins to wrap a strand of Will's hair round his finger. "Do you recognise the piece?"

"No," says Will, still thinking longingly of the hours of intricate amusement that could be obtained from taking a screwdriver to the gramophone's smug wooden casing and discovering all its secrets. "I don't know much about classical music." In fact the music is far less intriguing than the mechanism through which it's produced, because there's something almost magical about such an ingenious contraption that can harness a melody and distil sound with nothing more than pulleys and ratchet wheels – and the idea of imposing logic and mastery over its convoluted mysteries is rather reassuring. "What is it?" he finally adds, wondering if he's being rude in the lack of real interest in the original question.

"Brahms," replies Hannibal. "I last heard it played live when I was in Paris. Perfect to waltz to."

"Who were you waltzing around with in Paris?" asks Will, jointly intrigued and irritated by the image before giving a grumble of protest as Hannibal gently lifts him out the way so he can get to his feet.

“A very fascinating and singular woman,” says Hannibal. “She currently lives in London… perhaps you may meet her one day.”

Will makes a non-committal grunting sound at this (frankly appalling) offer then frowns in confusion when he sees that Hannibal is holding out his hand. “What?” says Will, squinting upwards from beneath his hair. “What do you want?”

“I want you to dance with me. Now.”

“Oh *God*,” says Will. “You must be joking. You’re joking aren’t you?” Hannibal begins to smile. “No,” replies Will firmly. “No *way*.”

“Why not?”

“Because…because I don’t like dancing. I don’t know how.”

“How do you know you don’t like it if you haven’t done it often enough to learn?”

“I just know, all right? And don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

“*That* look. You’re trying to bullshit me into feeling sorry for you. I bet you practice it in front of the mirror when I’m not there. You use those charity circulars of orphans as a reference, don’t you? You’re giving me your sad orphan bullshit face.” Hannibal, undeterred, tugs him to his feet and he starts to laugh. “*No* – stop it. I don’t want to. I don’t want you pulling me round the room.”

“Then you may pull me around the room instead. I give you full permission to lead.” Hannibal wraps his arms around Will’s back and begins to manoeuvre them in time to the music, with Will laughing and protesting half-heartedly the entire time with assorted variations of ‘No…this is stupid...stop it you maniac.’

“There you go,” says Hannibal. “You dance beautifully.”

“If you ever tell anyone about this,” replies Will, resting his chin on Hannibal’s shoulder, “then I will *kill* you.”

“Noted.”

“I don’t even mean that as a euphemism. I shall literally kill you – even your sad bullshit face won’t stop me. And enough with the tugging, Dr Lecter; I thought you were going to let me lead? That means you have to follow.”

“Yes, indeed; you may lead me as much as you wish. And by the way I was being entirely sincere – you have a very good sense of rhythm.”

“Do I?” asks Will, somewhat sceptical.

“Certainly you do.”

Will makes a humming noise while considering this, ultimately deciding that with another partner he'd probably be fairly hopeless but in the current context it's more about natural synchronisation and connection. In fact in this respect dancing seems like a form of communication; anticipating the other person's movement and attuning with it, fluid and aligned. Then, rather bizarrely, he feels last night's altercation with Matthew Brown spinning into his mind in the sense that a fight is not entirely dissimilar – another form of physical interaction and mirroring – and if so, had Hannibal been there, whether they would have been able to predict and coordinate their movement in the same way. The image is not only unexpected but rather unsettling, and he briefly screws his eyes closed to banish it.

"Where have you gone?" asks Hannibal softly. "Stay here with me."

"Sorry, just…thinking about things."

"I know, I can tell. That incendiary mind of yours; it never gives you any peace, does it?"

"Sometimes it does," says Will, skimming his hands up and down Hannibal's back.

"Thinking about the investigation?"

"Yes," lies Will. "Matthew Brown seemed like a promising suspect for the Ripper murders. Now we're back to square one."

"But you always had your doubts?"

"I suppose I was hoping the doubts were wrong and we might have finally got him."

"Wishful thinking," replies Hannibal. "You knew it could never really have been him. He only ever comprised one aspect of the Ripper's pathology – the man himself is far more complex. More predatory. And yet also far more riven and divided. You saw it immediately from the letter he sent you."

"I know," says Will bleakly.

"Von Goethe has a summary for it," continues Hannibal thoughtfully. "'*Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, And one is striving to forsake its brother*." He brushes his mouth against Will's ear and murmurs. "Rather like you."

"I *know*." Will nips his teeth against Hannibal's throat to make him stop talking. "Still ringing that same bell aren't you?"

"Of course. Just as you are yourself – in every thought and deed, even if you won't entirely admit it." He runs his hands over Will's waist then deftly untucks his shirt so he can stroke against bare skin, dipping his fingers lower and lower until Will gives a soft moan and arches up against Hannibal's chest. "You feel so warm my love. Humid, almost. As if there's a fire inside you."

As he finishes speaking the music finally winds down and he immediately pauses and holds them both still, spending a few seconds listening to the sound of their breathing in the suddenly silent room. "The irrepressible Will Graham," says Hannibal finally, straight into

Will's ear. "So fragile yet so fierce and resolute. I adore it, Will. I am *captivated* by it. You are so beautifully broken yet never broken-spirited. The two things are not the same, did you know that? All these pieces of you and yet you are never truly fragmented. The light shines through your slivers and cracks – luminous in all your damage. What is it going to take for you to appreciate it yourself?"

You, thinks Will with startling clarity. Although just like Hannibal the night before, he can't quite bring himself to say it out loud.

Chapter End Notes

"….as he engages himself with drawing Will." Little known fact: 78.9% of all Hannigram fanart is actually drawn by Hannibal and features him and Will cosplaying Achilles and Patroclus. Just sayin'.

Many thanks also to the fabulous graham_cracker for flagging up the von Goethe quote which I'd completely forgotten was in the show :-)

Fiiiiiiinally, apologies for resorting to the rather simplistic top/bottom trope in this chapter. I hope it makes sense in the context of the fic, but nevertheless that scene does get close to implying that choosing to top/bottom automatically enacts relationship dynamics or is akin to an actual orientation – which of course we all know is not true in real life.

ETA Jan 2018

Thanks to the very talented nnova there's now some exceptionally beautiful art for this chapter, which you can feast your eyes on here (it's not explicit, but possibly borderline NSFW). Please stop by if you have a chance and give some love to an amazing Fannibal artist :-)

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> Hello my lovelies, happy Saturday. So, remember the Sad Orphan Bullshit Face from the last chapter? Well thanks to the time and talent of the fabulous graham_cracker it now has its own gifset! Sad Orphan Bullshit Face Gifset…omg, this made my entire week. I can also see where Sassy Victorian Will gets his obsession with duality from, because I'm still not completely sure how all these intense emotional scenes and 'Sad Orphan Bullshit Face' manage to coexist in the same fic X-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That night Will abandons his plan to return to his own room and opts to stay with Hannibal instead, ultimately deciding that there's a restful intimacy to the whole thing that feels incredibly natural and effortless, as if they been doing it for years – going upstairs by candlelight and talking and laughing together in low voices; sitting on the end of the bed with his legs crossed while bickering amicably over who's going to build up the fire and whose turn it is to have first read of the newspaper, then rolling up his tie and pitching it at Hannibal's head after he says that it resembles the colour of an undercooked fish (and who catches it and throws it back again), before finally dozing off in Hannibal's arms with their legs twined together. The assorted sensations make the room feels tranquil and snug – the smouldering remains of the fire that stains the moonlight a rosy pink colour; the faint smell of lavender from the pastille by the lamp; the way he can hear Hannibal's heartbeat from where his face is resting against his chest – and Will sleeps enough soundly at first, undisturbed by the usual succession of stalking night terrors. Nevertheless he still jolts awake a few hours later with a mind that's itching and tingling and consumed with the sort of anxious agitation that makes further rest impossible.

It's an unpleasant sensation, rather like the mental equivalent of having something stuck between your teeth, and after staring fretfully at the ceiling for a few minutes he carefully untangles himself from beneath Hannibal's arm then pulls on a few clothes and creeps downstairs. Then he silently pads down the corridor and towards the consulting room noting, as usual, the improbably large lock on the cellar door and making a mental note (also as usual) that at some point he *really* has to ask what's stored down there of sufficient value to warrant it. After a few moments pacing across the rug he lights some candles and pulls up a chair at Hannibal's desk, gazing into space for a few moments before starting to write. The first few words are cramped and hesitant, blotted around the edges from the unwieldly way he's handling the pen, but rapidly grow faster and smoother as the nib begins to race across the page and all the half-formed impressions from the past few weeks begin to crystallise and take formal shape. At times it's as if he's snatching them out the air, forcing them into a logical semblance of order and clarity like someone corralling wild horses, but he carries on regardless: relentless in the pursuit of a task that Scotland Yard at large has deemed a pointless waste of time but which Will instinctively knows to be necessary. Because no

matter what conventional police procedure claims to be the case, there *is* a method to this madness: pieces of a puzzle which are jagged and deformed yet can still be made to fit. And so he continues writing, focussed and intent, with a fluid combination of formal forensic facts and his own cryptic capability to intuit depravity from the point of view of the depraved. Because it's there – it *is* – and he can draw it out. The anatomy of a monster.

Things We Know About Jack The Ripper:

- *Male.*
- *Right handed.*
- *White. A non-white person would be conspicuous and no witnesses ever mentioned seeing someone of a different ethnic group to themselves.*
- *Some level of skill in using a knife.*
- *Has a job – all the murders occurred on Friday nights or weekends.*
- *Lives alone or has access to a private area to remove/destroy bloodstained clothing and store body parts.*
- *Unmarried. Someone capable of mutilating female victims to this extent could not conduct a normal relationship with a woman on a day-to-day basis.*

Things We Think We Know About Jack The Ripper:

- *Likely to be of a similar social status to the victims – has been so widely reported that the killer is a doctor that the women would have been cautious of a customer that appeared wealthy and well-dressed.*
- *Almost certainly lives or works in Whitechapel and commits his crimes where he feels a degree of security and familiarity.*
- *Dislikes the pseudonym 'Jack the Ripper' and refuses to use it. Possibly has a different alias for himself?*
- *Deranged hatred of women. Previous disturbed relationship with a female authority figure (mother/grandmother/older sister)?*
- *Finds his compulsion to kill to be tormenting ('From hell')?*
- *Grandiose ('It is only right that the man sent to hunt the hunter is distinctive') and believes there to be some kind of higher purpose to his crimes ('Like me you have been misrepresented in the newspapers…When I show myself to you then you will understand fully')?*

- *Hates/fears women but also has a destructive fascination with them (e.g., repetitive deep stab wounds suggestive of both rage and pent-up sexual tension; nature of mutilations implies a perverse curiosity about the female body). Therefore possible that he seeks out female companionship, although this would be from women he considers passive and non-threatening (e.g., an older woman, or one with some kind of infirmity or illness).*

- *Extraordinarily violent and focussed in committing the crimes but simultaneously unstable, reckless and immature (e.g. not sophisticated enough to try and conceal the bodies).*

- *Targets victims who are easily accessible because he lacks the confidence to initiate contact with them. Socially inadequate – murders provide a level of gratification and fulfilment that's unavailable in other areas of his life?*

So many dichotomies, thinks Will fretfully. Grandiose yet inadequate; focused yet chaotic… it's almost like dealing with two separate people. His wrist is starting to ache in protest so he puts down the pen and glances at the clock, surprised to see that nearly 20 minutes have passed in what feels like as many seconds. Then he stares down at the page again and his expression hardens. "I'm going to get you, you bastard," he says out loud. And then, thinking of the first Ripper – wraith-like in his subtlety and still so elusive and unknowable – "And you too."

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, hey," says Will without turning round. "I didn't hear you come in."

Hannibal prowls up to the desk and puts his hands on Will's shoulders. "I woke up and found you gone. I was concerned you might be sleepwalking."

"I haven't done that in ages."

"That doesn't diminish my concern I'm afraid. What are you writing?"

Will rakes his fingers through his hair then passes the list to Hannibal, who runs his eyes over it approvingly. "A profile," he says after a pause. "Very enterprising."

"What do you think? Am I missing anything?"

Hannibal looks thoughtful for a few seconds and scans the page again before adding: "Yes."

Will seizes up the pen and waits expectantly but there's no further response. "Okay…what?" he says with a hint of impatience. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Quid pro quo Will," replies Hannibal with a faint smile.

"Oh God, are we really still doing this? Really? Why can't you just ask me to go down on you like a normal person?" Hannibal's smile broadens slightly. "Fine," says Will, dropping the pen in a long-suffering sort of way. "If you *must*. What do you want to know?"

“So many things,” replies Hannibal caressingly, drawing out each syllable to an almost impossible degree. “Although I suppose I must ration my curiosity, mustn’t I? So, for our current purposes – I wish to know how you are feeling in regards the other night.”

Will flinches beneath Hannibal’s hands at the mention of this, who continues to hold him in place with a grip that’s soft yet persuasive. “You mean Matthew Brown?” he says after a pause.

“I do.”

“I already told you.”

“You told me what you were feeling *then*. I wish to know what you are feeling *now*.”

Will hesitates again then dips his head slightly so Hannibal has to lean in to hear. “My feelings haven’t changed.”

“And do you wish that they had?”

“Perhaps,” says Will, beginning to drum his fingers against desk top. “But they haven’t.”

“Your thoughts have altered though haven’t they? Now the passion of the moment has passed your rational mind is reflecting on your feelings and wishing to change them.”

“Of course,” says Will with a hint of defensiveness.

“Yes, the mind gives up so easily doesn’t it?” replies Hannibal softly. “It’s so persuadable; so inconsistent. Tempest-tossed like as many storm clouds – so susceptible to each passing influence. Every transgression, both literal and imagined, takes place in the mind. It’s why folk wisdom advises us to ‘listen to your heart.’ But to do so, of course, one must first learn to trust it; and how can you trust an instinct like this?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” says Will sharply.

“I’m asking you, of course. That’s the whole point of this Will; I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me. Besides, the great ambition of life is self-realization: to comprehend one’s own temperament and inclination.” He waits a few seconds, allowing the silence to stretch out, before increasing the pressure on Will’s shoulders and forcing him to turn round so he can run a single long finger beneath his chin and slowly tip his face upright. “So tell me,” says Hannibal in the same softly rhythmic voice. “What follows after?”

Will shifts uncomfortably in the chair, clearly resenting the intrusion yet somehow still prepared to tolerate it, and Hannibal’s faint smiles grows fractionally broader as Will stares back at him: fierce, young, unafraid and shimmering in the candlelight as if surrounded by tiny flares. “Appreciation,” he finally says, not once breaking eye contact.

“Exactly so. To appreciate it fully: to live it completely, and embrace it unashamedly, and to create one’s own rhythm and rhapsody and refuse to be a pale frustrated echo of a

composition set in place by someone else."

"Oh yeah?" replies Will, suddenly tiring of the game. He jerks his head free then hooks his legs round the back of Hannibal's, alternating the pressure as if threatening to push him over. "And what if it's *your* composition? Last time I looked you seemed to rather enjoy the role of conductor."

"Not at all," replies Hannibal smoothly. "It is as I said: I can suggest, and I can enquire – perhaps I can even cultivate – but I can't contort your instinct beyond the forms inherent to you. I can't change your nature. So embrace it *mylimasis*, and then examine yourself. Write your own myth, construct your own purpose; be a magnificent version of yourself and not a mediocre version of what other people wish you to be – you owe yourself nothing less. Don't be fearful or ashamed or guilty. Be *alive*."

Will's eyes dart nervously at this and he shakes his head, clearly conflicted by the numerous double meanings woven throughout the speech. "What are you actually suggesting?" he says sharply. "For God's sake. I mean, I *killed* someone."

"No," replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. "You transformed what was unworthy and useless into something artistic. You removed unspeakable ugliness from the world and, in the process of your own metamorphosis, left something beautiful in its place. That beautiful thing is *you* Will Graham – that is your design." Will immediately falls silent, reeling slightly as if stunned by a physical blow, and Hannibal sees it and then smiles into the darkness: poised and artful and infinitely patient. "Thank you Will," he says softly. "And so, as agreed: quid pro quo. What you are missing is something you've already identified yourself in terms of those job interviews you were holding at Scotland Yard."

Will blinks a few times, badly thrown off course – exactly as intended – by this abrupt swerve in tone. "His job?" he says, rather hazily.

"Yes, his occupation may be key. Look at your list again."

Will blinks a few more times. "No, I don't…What *was* that?"

"What was what?"

"*That*," says Will.

"That," replies Hannibal, "was me asking you a question and you elaborating a response."

"Me! *Me* elaborating?"

"Naturally you," says Hannibal calmly; so calmly that Will immediately starts to feel ashamed for being unreasonable. "How can I possibly expand upon your mind set without the raw materials? I'm afraid you're giving me more credit than I deserve if you think I can construct an entire version of you without your collaboration." He pauses delicately then runs his eyes over Will's face in a lingering way. "After all, *mylimasis* – I was not with you that night in the alleyway."

Will visibly flinches at this and Hannibal takes a step closer, admiring how pale and haunted he looks in the flickering candles. “So…” he says softly. Will glances up, a hint of panic in the large eyes as if he suspects he’s about to hear something devastating, and Hannibal reaches out a hand and smooths his hair back off his forehead; briefly overcome with appreciation for this beautifully broken yet ultimately unbreakable collection of principles and consequence. “*Mano meilė*,” murmurs Hannibal, “how you overpower me. Now – look at the list again.”

Will blinks a few more times and then spins round in the chair almost gratefully, clearly relieved to have something practical to focus on that doesn’t involve himself. He clears his throat and Hannibal doesn’t need to see him to know he’ll still look stunned and pale yet fighting heroically to overcome it – fighting so tirelessly, all the time, and so often contrary to his own interests. “Okay,” says Will after a few seconds in something that closer resembles his normal voice. “I’m looking.”

“Look closely,” says Hannibal.

“I am.”

“Be sure that you do. This time you have excelled yourself.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“What I mean,” says Hannibal, soft and intense, “is that *everything you need to catch him is already there*.”

Will flinches again then makes a sighing sound so low it’s almost a hiss. “Okay,” he says again, and there’s a clear thrill of energy in his voice. “Okay. You said you thought the job advert was a good lure, so…” He falls quiet for a few seconds, scanning up and down the items on the page, then abruptly groans and strikes his forehead with his palm. “Oh God, of *course*. He’s doing that kind of job already isn’t he?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal, quietly impressed at such a quick deduction. “I suspect so.”

“Shit.”

“And the reason it’s likely is because…?”

“It’s where he’s acquired the knife skills.”

“Very good. What else?”

Will leans back in the chair and closes his eyes, frowning slightly as he begins to flex his fingers together. “He could use it to live out his fantasies vicariously,” he says eventually, his voice rather low and mechanical sounding. “So he’s unlikely to be a butcher or abattoir worker: not impossible, just less likely. A mortuary assistant, on the other hand….” He pauses then snaps open his eyes and glances at Hannibal. “The Whitechapel Hospital.”

“Clever boy,” says Hannibal approvingly. “Yes, I think it is a promising place to begin. His training ground, as it were; a place to serve an apprenticeship before taking his proficiencies

onto the streets."

"Jesus," says Will. "We've been standing across from it nearly every night. I can't believe I've been so *stupid*."

"Not at all; on the contrary you were too ingenious for your own good. In staging the job applications you thought ahead of yourself and now merely need to retrace your steps. Besides, they're still being conducted aren't they? There remains a good chance he may apply."

"I should have seen it."

"You did – just now. And I should not have seen it at all if you had not combined the facts together in such a lucid way."

"I'll speak with Mr Crawford tomorrow," says Will restlessly. "We should begin interviewing the hospital staff as soon as we can."

Hannibal runs his finger along Will's cheekbone then down his face, noting the contrast between the softness of his skin and the frantic tension in the muscles quilted along his jaw. "Come back to bed," he says softly and Will nods in a rather aimless way, suddenly aware of how crushingly tired he actually feels. The last hour's been too intense, too disconcerting: too many half-formed implications and insinuations that slither to the floor like silk revealing… what?

"I need to do a separate profile for the first Ripper," he adds wearily, trying to reconstruct his train of thought before Hannibal came downstairs. "There's less information but something might still stand out."

"I'm sure that would be very wise."

"Not that anyone'll take it seriously. I wish I knew what had happened to change Mr Crawford's mind."

"Perhaps he will change it back again," replies Hannibal airily. "Who knows? Some new evidence might emerge."

"Unlikely," says Will in a pessimistic voice.

"Perhaps it is." Hannibal places his hand on Will shoulder and begins to steer him towards the stairs. "Although to paraphrase your own observation: unlikely – but not impossible."

*****

The next morning Will wakes up shivering in the pale winter sun to find that Hannibal is staring at him from across the pillow in a deeply concentrated way with eyes that are dark and unblinking. He appears poised yet oddly vigilant, almost as if he's been watching Will the entire time; and Will meets his eye wordlessly then gazes up at his face and loves him. "You looked so peaceful," says Hannibal finally, his voice soft as ghosts in the silent air, "but I confess, I still resent it."

“Why?” asks Will, already knowing the answer.

“Because you go somewhere I can’t follow you. I want to keep you by me always.”

And Will knows he should find this unsettling or objectionable; he knows he should contradict it. But he doesn’t – how can he, when he holds the same imperative himself? It’s like the conversation last night: cold logic and cool hard reason *vs.* instinct and need and the ardour of sensation. Mind *vs*. heart. So he just continues to stare, exchanging acknowledgement and silent recognition, as Hannibal reaches out to cradle his head with one hand and rub his thumb against Will’s lower lip with the other before slowly pulling him forwards so Will can sigh into Hannibal’s mouth as their tongues slide together and Hannibal gently pushes his legs apart. This time when they make love it’s far slower than before – yearning and tender, just softly rocking against one another and gazing into each other’s eyes – yet Will can feel himself growing overwhelmed from the intensity of it nonetheless, as if he’s too brimful of sensation and there’s nowhere to lay it down. He twines his legs round Hannibal’s back as Hannibal grips hold of his hands and the closeness is reassuring but still not enough to quell the small broken-off gasps he can’t help making or the way his eyes are widening with something like shock at such helpless, hopeless devotion. Because he knows he’s a willing martyr to it – a sacrifice to the pyre of love – and luminous with such powerful feelings yet fortified with nothing better than a frail human body in which to house and sustain them. It’s like free-floating, like flailing and falling…because this forbidden love could be his downfall and it terrifies him that he can’t bring himself to care.

“Will,” murmurs Hannibal. “Beloved.” His fingers, skimming over Will’s face, are gossamer-light; light as feathers. “It’s all right. Don't be afraid. I don't want to hurt you – I only want to know you.” Will whimpers slightly and Hannibal makes a soothing noise, the words oddly cadenced and hypnotic, as he rocks his hips until Will is gasping helplessly and clinging onto his shoulders. “I only want you to understand how beautiful you are. How unique. Beautiful, unique and unassailable – that's all I've ever wanted for you. *You,* Will. It's always been you. I won’t let you go.” For a few seconds it sounds more ominous than reassuring, only Will doesn’t care about that either…doesn't care about anything. “I would kill to keep you,” adds Hannibal, brushing his lips against Will’s forehead; and Will gives a low moan as he tenses, quivers and then starts to come, digging his teeth so hard against Hannibal’s shoulder he can taste blood as Hannibal grips hold of his hands again and pins him down against the mattress. “*Mylimasis*,” murmurs Hannibal, soft and intense. “There is nothing I would not do.”

“Oh God. Me too. You know I would…you *know*…”

“I know,” says Hannibal. He gives another hard thrust and then gasps against Will’s skin, twisting their fingers together as Will arches his back and pushes up his hips, desperate to take it as deep as possible. “You are mine now Will – *you belong to me.* You belong to me and you are *everything*.”

“Everything,” repeats Will hazily. “You too…always.” He clings onto Hannibal tighter still, so blissful and pliable that he doesn't even complain when Hannibal fetches a damp flannel to tenderly wash his thighs and abdomen, despite the fact it's the type of thing he'd normally insist on doing himself. Then he pulls Hannibal down on top of him and feels so secure and satisfied in it that he eventually falls asleep like that, both arms twined round his shoulders

like flowers coiled around a wreath. When he wakes for the second time it's to find Hannibal gently extricating himself, trying to do it as slowly as possible so as not to disturb him; and he sees Will looking at him and smiles.

"I'm sorry. You know I would happily render you every possible service, but unfortunately acting as a blanket cannot be one of them. At least not today – I have patients arriving with an hour."

"It's fine," says Will, "I need to get going myself." He pulls himself upright and yawns, then pauses and narrows his eyes. "Did you just offer your services as a blanket?"

"No."

"A human *blanket*."

"I'm afraid you are destined to be disappointed."

"You did – I totally heard you."

"I was lying."

"That's okay," says Will magnanimously. "Anyway you don't have ideal blanket properties."

"The collar bones, I suppose?"

"No, because you weigh a ton."

Hannibal rolls his eyes and ruffles Will's hair in a long-suffering way, and Will wrinkles his nose at him and leans up for a kiss before curling beneath the covers again so he can surreptitiously watch Hannibal getting dressed, noting all the little idiosyncrasies with a degree of fondness: the intense way he gazes at his reflection when adjusting his tie, for example, and the methodical yet forceful manner of fastening each shirt button. It's almost like seeing someone put on a costume in anticipation of adopting a part – in this case, respectable medical doctor of High Renown – because the impeccably starched shirts and silk ties feel a world away from the person who pins Will against the bed and scrapes his teeth along his throat before whispering darkly hypnotic suggestions about self-realisation, beauty and horror, and the grimly grinning vigour of death. In fact it's rather thrilling that this is a side only Will really gets to see; what's underneath the suit, as it were.

Nevertheless when Will is here like this, pale and exposed in the cold light of day, it's difficult to admit to himself that he finds Hannibal physically attractive. It's much easier, after all, to pretend that he's predominantly drawn to his mind and personality; that the appeal is something lofty and intellectual and far removed from the type of immoderate lustfulness that's frowned upon when expressed towards a woman and is literally *unspeakable* when directed at another man. But it's there all the same and it's impossible and pointless to continue denying it. Hannibal, Will decides, is *beautiful*; even though it's not an epithet that's typically applied to male attractiveness, and which shouldn't even be true at all given that his component features don't really work in isolation. He has too many bones and sharp angles, as gaunt and chiselled as a knight in a Medieval fresco – but combined together they still

create something that's undeniably striking. In another way he also reminds Will of the illustrations on the covers of the pulp magazines his father used to buy him when he was much younger: venturesome, hyper-masculine men with chiselled faces, broad chests and rippling muscles who were always primed to shoot bandits or wrestle wild bears or rescue miners from collapsed tunnels (or some equally implausible bullshit) while doll-faced women swooned over them in the background. Not that Hannibal's habits or personality remotely accord with the same aesthetic. Impossible, for example, to imagine those lantern-jawed men speaking a dozen different languages, hosting dinner parties, suturing wounds with tiny stitches or staring intently into mirrors to ensure their ties were fastened at a suitably precise angle. In fact if anything, considering his occupation, a life of roughness and privation is more suitable for Will; although once again appearances are clearly deceiving because no one would think that to look at him. Will now reflects rather ruefully on his slim face with its irritatingly delicate features – the sensitive mouth, the wide eyes obscured behind his glasses – and the sheer unfeasibility of being able to quell a bullying ostler into submission with a single wave of the hand in the same way as Hannibal. In turn, it's impossible to imagine Matthew Brown's feral gloating face informing Hannibal that "You're too frightened to shoot me. Look at you. You're *terrified*." Then he's aware of feeling irrationally irritated by the fact that Hannibal manages to appear like a far more impressive badass than Will himself does, before finding a small measure of consolation in the fact that at least he has a massive badass at his permanent disposal; and that if life gives you lemons, make lemonade (or, to put it another way: if life has given you a rather feeble, non-badass appearance then shack up with a gigantic badass whilst making full use of their badassery for your own self-serving purposes)…

"Will," says Hannibal, "you're not listening to me."

"Sorry – what was that?"

"I asked what time you expect to be home."

"Oh, right, yeah," says Will, beginning to tug on his own shirt whilst feeling absurdly happy that Hannibal has referred to Harley Street as Will's home rather than just asking him what time he'll be back. "About the usual time I should think. Maybe a little later. I need to see Al…Mrs Bloom and Miss Verger. And go to Scotland Yard."

"Very good," replies Hannibal, who sounds as serene and composed as ever and yet is already beginning to secretly sulk at the idea of other people having the opportunity to run their sickly gloating eyes over his beautiful boy when Will really ought to be here as Hannibal's sole property. He now permits himself a brief yet charming fantasy of compelling Will to stay in the bedroom, perhaps taking his clothes away from him as an added incentive, then leaving him there as an exquisitely pliable captive – fretfully flushed and lovely and with nothing better to do all afternoon than drape himself across the silk sheets looking beautiful while waiting for Hannibal to despatch the final patient and return upstairs to take care of him. Hannibal's mind begins to mist over as he pictures Will's face while laid out underneath him: almost bewildered at first, and very faintly frowning because he's still not completely used to the sensation (and which is always enormously pleasurable because it's a reminder that no one else has ever done this to him except Hannibal) before beginning to appear rather shocked, as if he can't quite believe how good it feels. Then how he finally loses himself

completely, mind and body departing from one another as he gives himself over to the feelings, the desire, the rapture of no longer being in control of what he's doing. It's achingly beautiful; almost unbearably so. Hannibal's eyes then narrow slightly as he considers, in turn, how similar Will must have looked that night in the alleyway: fearful confusion slowly dissolving away, then triumphant and euphoric in the ecstasy of the kill…

"What?" interjects Will. "You're staring at me."

"Yes, I suppose I am," replies Hannibal calmly.

"Well it's *rude*," says Will with a hint of triumph.

Hannibal smirks then strolls over and tips Will's head back to inspect the stitches before gently lifting his eyelid to check for any burst vessels in the bruised eye. Then he wraps him in his arms and kisses his forehead, smiling at the contented way it makes Will sigh. "My little wild thing," says Hannibal tenderly. "How I long for you."

"You can have me later. I need to go out."

"Then you shall have to let go of me first."

"Yes," says Will, still clinging on.

"What a terrifying grip you have *mylimasis*."

"Hmm, well, don't you forget it."

"Indeed – I shall not forget it."

"Make sure you don't," says Will, finally letting go. "Behave yourself or you'll be at the mercy of my terrifying grip."

"I always behave *impeccably*," replies Hannibal in an innocent voice. "But look at you in this light – how pale you are."

"I'm fine."

"Do you have time for breakfast before you leave?"

"Not really. I'm already running late."

"Then get something later. Remember that you're still convalescing."

"Will do."

"And wrap up warm; it's started to snow again."

"Yes, *dad*," says Will. "Stop doctoring me." He reaches up to kiss Hannibal goodbye then squares his shoulders in a way Hannibal finds endlessly endearing. "Remember there's a terrifying grip with your name on it."

“My behaviour all day shall be beyond reproach,” says Hannibal with a slow smile. He waves Will off then retreats to the window so he can admire the sight of his slim young silhouette striding determinedly down Harley Street before finally being swallowed up in the swirls of snow and fog. ‘*Even his griefs are a joy long after to one that remembers all that he wrought and endured*’ quotes Hannibal softly to himself. From this distance Will looks fragile – deceptively so – as if the streaks of shadowy fog are competing to devour him. He continues watching until Will disappears from view and only then reluctantly turns away from the window and rings the serving bell next to his desk.

“Good morning Mary,” he says when she appears. “No visitors today before eleven o’clock.”

“Of course sir. Will you be wanting anything else?”

“I do, as it happens,” replies Hannibal, with his usual Sphinx-like smile. “If you would be so good as to fetch me the key to the cellar.”

*****

Will arrives at Scotland Yard on time and manages to fill Jack in with the new insights regarding the Whitechapel Hospital – although not before having to endure a substantial amount of tutting and hand-wringing over the state of his face. “I got attacked in the street,” says Will blithely for the fourth time. “There was a group of them; they tried to steal my wallet.”

“And did they?” asks Zeller sympathetically.

“No I hung onto it. Stupid really. I guess if I’d handed it over I might have avoided this.”

“Congratulations Mr Graham,” says Price. “Single-handedly fighting the American War of Independence, I see.”

“I’d have given it to them,” adds Sergeant Matthews, almost apologetically. “I’m afraid I’m a bit of a coward.”

“Don’t mind that young man,” says Price. “We can’t all be small bearded dynamos like Mr Graham here – I myself, for example, would have offered them all my worldly goods before they’d even asked for them. Who sewed you up?” he adds, running a discerning professional eye over the tiny row of stitches.

“Dr Lecter did,” replies Will and then, suddenly emboldened by his newly acquired ‘who gives a fuck anyway’ attitude; “I’ve been staying with him.”

“My word, have you really?” says Sergeant Matthews enviously. “In that amazing house?”

“Yeah.”

“You lucky bastard,” adds Zeller. “What’s your secret?”

Will, temporarily unable to think of a reply that doesn’t involve references to being a mongoose, says he doesn’t really know.

“Have a think about it, I need your advice. I want to get adopted by a wealthy doctor too.”

“Well don’t look at me,” says Price. “Delightful as you both are I’m afraid I’m not prepared to adopt either one of you.”

“Mr Graham’s already been adopted; I’m the one going free to a good home.”

“A rousing plea, I’m sure,” says Price. “And yet I remain unmoved. Oh look, here’s Mr Crawford – perhaps he’ll adopt you instead. Would you settle for a wealthy superintendent in place of a doctor? He’s isn’t as glamorous as Dr Lecter, very true, but I’m sure he’d give you a good standard of living.”

“What’s that?” asks Jack.

“Mr Graham is giving us advice on how to get ourselves adopted by a wealthy person,” explains Sergeant Matthews in an earnest tone of voice.

Jack turns round with his mouth open. “Never mind,” says Will.

“Yes, I’m afraid there’s a prior claim on Mr Graham although Mr Zeller is going spare if you want him,” says Price. “He might be a little less pretty and bearded than the American edition, although has the additional advantage of not requiring stitching up in the middle of the night.”

“Yes, that *does* look painful,” says Jack, gesturing towards his own face. “Worse in this light. Are you sure you don’t want the rest of the day off?”

“I’m fine sir, honestly. How are you?”

“Oh he didn’t hurt me,” replies Jack with a hint of smugness. “Although not through want of trying, the little bast…” Zeller and Sergeant Matthews look at him with interest. “The little *beast*,” says Jack firmly.

“No news I take it?”

“None at all; he seems to have vanished again.”

“I’m sure he’ll turn up eventually,” says Will airily.

“Let’s hope so. I know you had your doubts about him being the Ripper…”

“So did you sir.”

Jack nods, obviously pleased to have this acknowledged. “Freddy Lounds on the other hand…”

“You mean that gruesome young man might have been responsible for the Fleet Street job?” asks Price in horror.

“Possibly,” replies Jack. “At least he’s our most promising suspect so far. And you watch yourself, won’t you Mr Graham? He obviously has some odd infatuation with you.”

“As does the Ripper himself if that letter’s anything to go by,” says Price. “My commiserations Mr Graham; you’re like catnip for them aren’t you?” He gives Will a kindly pat on the arm. “Never mind, at least they don’t want to adopt you as well.”

“Speaking of which…” says Jack. He lowers his voice and then puts a hand on Will’s shoulder to steer him a little away from the rest of the group. “Now, this is a bit of a sensitive issue but…”

“What sir?”

Jack sucks in a grumpy lungful of air then lets it out again. “Dr Chilton,” he finally says.

“What about him?”

“Any…concerns?”

“Have *I* any concerns?” asks Will in confusion. Then he remembers the night of the dinner party – and Hannibal’s subsequent prediction – and emits an irritated sigh that such a baseless suspicion is already being given a level of credence, however small. “Not at all sir,” he says firmly. “He’s not the man we’re looking for.”

“I know he’s not the current Ripper,” replies Jack, who sounds as if he’s choosing his words very carefully. “But regarding your theories about the original one…”

“No,” says Will in an even firmer voice.

“There’s numerous things that are starting to bother me,” continues Jack as if Will hasn’t said anything. “That scene at Dr Lecter’s house, *obviously*; the fact he’s now been seen in Whitechapel on five separate occasions – and the way he was so terribly insistent on having you committed as soon as you worked out the cannibalism link. I mean what he proposed was blatantly illegal – Dr Lecter made that very clear to me.”

“Did he?” asks Will in surprise.

“So why risk his professional reputation like that? What possible motivation could he have besides being desperate to shut you up?”

“He wants to examine me,” says Will, flushing very slightly. “He thinks I’d make a good case study.”

Jack makes a sceptical grunting noise. “Perhaps. Although if you’ll excuse me saying so it hardly seems a sufficient incentive.”

“Maybe not to us. But for a medical professional reputations can be made on that kind of thing.”

“Well that’s as may be,” replies Jack, who doesn’t sound remotely convinced. “But I still say it was a disproportionate risk.”

“Not really. He had no reason to think he wouldn’t get away with it – he *would* have if I hadn’t run.” Will pauses for a few seconds. “And you’d never have known about the legal aspect if Hann…Dr Lecter hadn’t made a point of telling you afterwards.”

“But when you consider it alongside the other things,” persists Jack. “Circumstantial evidence Mr Graham – it’s like the strands of a rope, and each strand weaves together to make the rope stronger and stronger.” Jack pauses, obviously pleased with this analogy. “Stronger and stronger until it ties the suspect to *justice*.”

“Sir,” says Will in a bored voice.

“And his behaviour at the dinner party was extraordinarily odd.”

“It was,” agrees Will, rather reluctantly. “I can’t argue with you there.”

“His housekeeper came to see me,” adds Jack, lowering his voice even further. “Delightful woman; very articulate and rational. She’s obviously concerned about him – told me he keeps lapsing into the same sort of sinister ramblings as he did at the dinner party, then afterwards doesn’t seem to remember anything about them.”

“I’m not sure what to tell you Mr Crawford,” says Will with a hint of impatience. “As far as I’m concerned there’s no way Dr Chilton could be responsible for the first set of murders. The real mystery is why his behaviour’s suddenly changed as much as it has.”

“So you *do* agree there’s something odd going on,” says Jack triumphantly.

Will gives up. “Why don’t you arrange a search of his house if you’re concerned? I don’t expect you’ll find anything, but at least it might put your mind at rest.”

“Splendid suggestion,” replies Jack, practically rubbing his hands with glee at the thought.

“Oh, and sir?”

“Yes?”

“Why the sudden change of heart? For weeks you’ve been dismissing the cannibalism angle – why take it seriously again now?”

Jack suddenly looks beady. “Because I thought your imagination was getting the better of you. And then this new evidence against Dr Chilton came to light so I began to reconsider.”

“New evidence *hasn’t* come to light,” says Will, who’s beginning to struggle to not let his impatience show. “And why did you decide I was being overly imaginative? You were inclined to take it seriously when I first told you. So was Dr Price.” He hesitates again. “Did…did someone try and change your mind?”

“Of course not,” replies Jack firmly, not quite looking Will in the eye. “You’ve done very well Mr Graham, I don’t mind telling you so – very well indeed. No one would have even realised there were two separate killers if not for you.”

“Well it’s enormously convenient for whoever the *real* one is,” snaps Will. “No attention on him at all – and then as soon as there is, it gets deflected. And then finally misdirected onto Dr Chilton. Seriously, Mr Crawford; it’s not him. Don’t let the investigation veer off course.”

“Well, we’ll see won’t we?” replies Jack in a complacent way that leaves Will twitching with irritation, but also with something much bleaker that he can’t quite bring himself to examine too closely. Although it’s probably nothing; it almost certainly *is* nothing. Nevertheless he still changes his plans and returns to Harley Street at midday rather than going to the pub with the others as first intended, telling himself that it’s because he misses Hannibal and wants an excuse to spend an extra hour with him. Hannibal seems very pleased to see him and promptly whisks him downstairs for lunch, which they eat in comfortable informality at the kitchen table with their jackets slung over the back of the chairs.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” says Will casually about ten minutes in. He carelessly twists his fork across the plate, not bothering to look up, as if the query is too inconsequential to warrant that much attention. “Did you speak to Jack Crawford about me? After I was ill?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal calmly. “I told you so, remember? It was how I was able to begin working with you at Scotland Yard.”

“I know. I know you did that, but…” Will pauses and takes sip of water, swirling it round before carefully replacing the glass on the table. “Did you tell him to disregard my theories about the first Ripper?”

“Not in so many words,” replies Hannibal in the same calm voice. “Although I confess, I *did* suggest you were at your best when interpreting contemporary evidence rather than analysing cases retrospectively. I’m sorry if you’re offended by that – and I don’t personally believe it – but it was done in the spirit of making a small concession in order to gain more ground later on.”

“Oh,” says Will, visibly relaxing. “Okay.”

“Considering the circumstances it was important to present you to Jack Crawford as being as competent and rational as possible,” continues Hannibal, fixing his dark eyes directly on Will’s face. “Perhaps I miscalculated, in the sense I underestimated how *very* keen he was to find a reason to bury his head in the sand – I certainly didn’t anticipate him abandoning the whole line of enquiry.” He pauses and then smiles very slightly. “Perhaps the time has now come to change his mind?”

“No, it’s fine,” says Will. “That all makes sense.” He’s not quite sure what it is that he’s feeling; not *relief* though, definitely not that. Relief would imply a level of doubt had been alleviated, and he has no reason to suspect Hannibal of anything. He *doesn’t* suspect him of anything. It was only a case of trying to get the loose ends to make sense – only ever that. And now they do.

*****

That afternoon Will sets off from Scotland Yard once more in order to meet with Alana and Margot – the first time since the fateful scene with Matthew Brown, and the idea of which feels almost unbearably fraught. By mutual consent they meet at a small suburban park by Camden High Street rather than at the house, and Will arrives early out of nerves then hovers rather aimlessly by the bandstand: deserted for the winter and looking decidedly gloomy and careworn with its tattered banner fluttering forlornly in the breeze. Alana and Margot appear through the gates a few minutes later, which creates a slightly awkward interval in that they're too close to pretend he hasn't seen them but too far away to greet properly and forces him to stand there watching them approach with an increasingly strained smile on his face. Alana is walking with a cane and Margot has some scratches on her face but otherwise both appear to be in remarkably good spirits.

"You caught him then?" says Margot with a sardonic nod towards Will's face.

"Yeah," replies Will simply. "I caught him." After a slightly loaded pause he adds: "I promise he won't bother you again." Unlike the men at Scotland Yard, he already knows he'll tell them the truth about Matthew Brown's ultimate fate if they ask him. Although with one important revision: death by gunshot, quick and clean and humane – respectable, even – like putting an animal out of its misery. It's not that he doesn't trust them but there is, after all, only person who Will can look in the face and acknowledge that he chose to beat someone to death…beat them to death with his own bare hands. Alana and Margot are gazing back at him now, matching pairs of quick dark eyes, and he sags slightly before adding: "I don't know what to say to you both; I don't have the words for it. I could stand here for a year and couldn't properly tell you how sorry I am."

"It wasn't your fault Will," says Alana with far more forbearance than he feels he deserves. "It's not like you asked for any of this. You didn't actively cause it."

"He only went after you because of me," replies Will, suddenly feeling a bit wretched. Mostly it's guilt that's responsible; but there's also an undeniable bleakness that while Alana and Margot were genuinely random targets, Will himself drew the madness in like a moth to a flame…a dark resonance within him which struck an answering echo in Matthew Brown that proved too irresistible to ignore.

"Yes, he did" replies Margot bluntly. Will nods unhappily and she runs her eyes over him before adding in a kinder voice: "although you realised that – and you came immediately and did everything you could."

"Not that you needed it," says Will with a faint smile. "You seemed to manage him pretty well on your own."

Margot and Alana exchange smiles themselves at this, luminous with private meaning that Will feels rather excluded from; and when he glances down he can't help noticing the way Alana's slim hand has crept into Margot's, who in turn moves her thumb to stroke the bare skin on Alana's wrist just above her glove. She catches him looking and smiles again but makes no move to take her hand away and Will clears his throat rather awkwardly. "I'm so

sorry," he repeats, and he knows that this time he's not only referring to Matthew Brown. "I should have realised…everything. I've been so blind."

"It's all right Will," says Alana in a gentle voice.

She doesn't add anything else but the tone is heavy with meaning – both absolution and unspoken recognition – and Will nods mutely, briefly overcome by the sincerity of the moment while also wanting to offer them something in return; to place his confidence into their hands, trusting and vulnerable…show them that their faith in him is not misplaced. "That man I've been staying with," he says abruptly. "Dr Lecter. Hannibal." They smile at him then, silently willing him on, and he clears his throat for a second time. "We're…"

"You're what?" says Margot.

Will swipes his hair out of his eyes from where it's getting blown by the wind and then falters again, suddenly unsure of what to say. He suspects they're both fairly unshockable but somehow delicacy alone is holding him back and he can't think of the right way of putting it that's not ludicrously coy and euphemistic but likewise isn't too graphic to risk offending them. It's pretty ridiculous to be honest: as if he can't find an acceptable compromise between 'Yes, we are very great friends indeed – the most splendid chums in fact, tally ho' and 'My dear ladies, behold before you someone who indulges in highly illegal man sex on a most enthusiastic and regular basis.' They're still not doing anything to help him out either; they want him to say it. To own it. Then he sees the way their hands are still clasped and a solution presents itself with such startling clarity that he feels ashamed of not thinking of it before.

"I fell in love with him," says Will, quiet yet firm. Even though it wasn't *quite* like that because he didn't just fall, he was raised up by it. But it feels so good to be able to finally say it out loud and he wants to say it again and again – shout it out, sing it even; pronounce it in tones of wonder or reverence for the rare and extraordinary thing that it is. And now Alana is smiling at him, and Margot too, and Will is smiling as well – everyone's smiling – and if any bystanders see them they'd undoubtedly wonder what three injured people could possibly find to beam about so radiantly on a wintry grey afternoon in the middle of London.

"I'm happy for you Will," says Alana at last in her quiet way. "You deserve it."

"Thanks," replies Will earnestly. "Thank you."

"You should bring him to the house. I'd like to meet him."

"Of course. Of course I will. Although I should probably warn you, he can sometimes be a bit..." He struggles to think of a way of putting it that doesn't sound disloyal. "A bit intimidating."

"That's all right," says Alana with a little grin. "If he needs bringing in line Margot can always throw another pitcher at his head."

"I can," confirms Margot. "I have a steady supply of pitchers."

Will laughs out loud at this, not least because he knows she'd be entirely capable. "I'll give him full warning," he says.

"Be sure that you do," replies Margot with mock severity.

Will laughs again at the thought of it and then suggests they take a turn around the park before he has to return to Scotland Yard. This is agreed to be a good idea, so he offers Alana one arm while Margot takes the other, and together the three of them set off in a comfortable, companionable promenade around the frosty flower beds and little Grecian statues, all coated in a fine sprinkling of snow as if dusted with icing sugar. Afterwards he watches them walk off homewards, long skirts skimming against the paving stones and arms round each other's waists, and feels a pang of envy that affectionate intimacy can be publically expressed between women in a manner that's completely impossible for men. Then he smiles again in spite of himself and pulls his hat further over his forehead against the cold before beginning the slow trudge back to Scotland Yard; reflecting, as he does so, on Hannibal's previous observation that '*the most beautiful quality of a true friendship is to understand, and be understood, with absolute clarity*.'

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Unfortunately Will's uplifted mood is destined to evaporate from this point onwards because he loses his bearings on the return journey and falls reluctant victim to London's notoriously confusing streets and throughways – which all seem to show a regrettable tendency to fuse together, then clamber and scramble over one another, then double-back when they're not supposed to, and all in all are about as knotted and tangled as a spool of dropped thread, especially when compared with the pragmatic grid-like design of most major American cities. By 16.30 he's forced to admit he's completely lost and is getting close to yelling with irritation as the frigid wind slices against his bruised face for the umpteenth time and four people in a row can't understand his accent clearly enough to give proper directions. "Trying to find your way back to Yank Land are you, mate?" says one self-appointed wag with a barrow of wooden crates that Will's sorely tempted to boot over – and probably would, too – before he finally spots Tower Bridge in the distance as a sufficiently familiar landmark to navigate the rest of the way without help.

Will's tired now and his feet are aching, so he takes a few moments to catch his breath and observe the spectacle of the bridge: so grand and yet somehow so contrived, like an illustration in a children's book. There are people surrounding him on all sides, not to mention a sprinkling of carts and carriages, yet nevertheless – stood there, gazing into the murky black water of the Thames – he briefly feels incredibly alone. It's an unsettling sensation and not even entirely understandable, yet neither the heaving throngs of Londoners that bustle past him, nor the recent intimacy with Alana and Margot, nor even the thought of Hannibal patiently awaiting his return 'home' is enough to fully insulate him from it. Then he shuffles and sighs and drags his hand across his face because he's miserably aware – deep, deep down, in places he's reluctant to acknowledge – that the feeling's being fuelled by an aching gaping emptiness that's actually been creeping up in silent predation for quite some time and has now chosen to pounce at a moment of vulnerability. A feeling that no amount of running and leaping and diving is enough to fully outpace and which, in its simplest form, is the stark awareness that he's *not the person he thought he was*, or might have been, or could

be in the future, or perhaps, most accurately of all, that he wanted to believe in. The loneliness comes from a sense of loss: the loss of the person who could never have killed another human being with their bare hands with all the calmly lethal and casual finality of snuffing out a candle. The person who would have been revolted by such a thing, who would have been stronger and more compelling than the dark mirror image who yearned to do it – who would have always been able to walk away. And so if the loneliness comes from a sense of loss then the emptiness comes from the sense of mourning: of grieving for the absence of something that, worst of all, was perhaps never really there.

Across the banks of the Thames Will can see a group of mudlarks sifting through the debris spewed out by the river, scurrying and weaving through the shadows as they industriously scavenge for bits of tin, old clothes, washed-up coins; anything they can possibly barter or sell. The sight of them conjures up a sudden vivid image of himself as a child, eyes too large in his face with a wild mop of hair, who tottered after his father on small unsteady legs on the way to the Potomac River to acquire the fundamentals of fishing. "You're never too young to learn," his father had said contentedly, taking hold of his hand to help him navigate a particularly rugged set of rocks that jutted out along the shore like giant's bones. "Looks like you're going to be a natural too; a regular chip off the old block, aren't you son?" On the way home they ran into one of the new neighbours, a little old woman freshly relocated from New York State with rosy crinkled cheeks like an apple. "What a precious little boy," she'd said to his father: "Look at him, I could eat him up with a spoon." Will had shuffled around in childish mortification but his father's face had acquired one of its rare, fond smiles and he'd briefly placed his hand on Will's hair while the neighbour continued to coo. She was still living next door to them a few years later when Will won a scholarship to the city school and his father looked ready to burst with pride. "Will's smart," he'd told her. "That's a smart boy right there. He'll do great things, I surely know it." Yet looking back on it now, stood in the cold damp blackness, the whole scene acquires a totally different meaning because it's impossible not to wonder if the Dark Twin was there too, stood by in the shadows the entire time? Was he there learning to fish and acquiring scholarships and being petted by the neighbours, all the while dreaming of when his moment would come and he'd be stood in the moonlight with black blood on his face and death at his feet, triumphant in the thrill of the kill with dripping gore-stained hands? Was he waiting Will's whole life?

Across the river the mudlarks are gathering up their spoils and preparing to depart as the sun sinks into the horizon while the fog swirls and the wardens begin to appear to light the gas lanterns; such meagre illumination amid so much darkness. Will turns away, exhausted and overwhelmed, and undeniably consumed with something a little like grief: a requiem for the person who never really was. He should lay a wreath in the alleyway – not for Matthew Brown, but for himself. *In memoriam*. Then he has a brief, helpless impulse to shout it out – '*What happened to me? Where did I go?*' – and probably would as well, except for the knowledge that no one would be able to answer; and that the person least able to of all is himself.

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Will finally returns to Harley Street some time later, shivering with cold and numb with tiredness, to find Hannibal reading in front of the fire and looking unusually pensive. *The London Literary Supplement* is spread across his knee and Will immediately recognises the

story as one he read himself the day before: a rather convoluted piece by Ellertson that's clunking with allegory and doesn't contain a single line of dialogue, and which outlines in floridly anguished prose the tragic end of a master musician who falls in love with his protégé only to have her leave him on discovering their artistic vision is not the same. It seems a rather pointless choice of material to become so thoughtful and hollow-eyed over; and compared to his own anguished realisations Will feels a flare of resentment towards Hannibal for being so secure and privileged that he has no better raw materials to draw upon for the purpose of self-indulgent melancholy. Biting back his irritation he takes off his coat and slings it over the back of the chair.

"Good evening," says Hannibal, neatly flicking over the page before glancing up and catching the expression on Will's face. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," replies Will bluntly. "More to the point, what's the matter with *you*? You look gloomy."

"Nothing at all," says Hannibal, putting the paper to one side. "Why would you imagine there was?"

"I told you – you look sad."

"A trick of the light, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose so," snaps Will, whose unhappiness has now reached the fretful pent-up pitch of spoiling for a fight. "In fact come to think of it I've never seen you show any real emotions. Not once. Not like normal people do. You don't get sad, you don't get angry – you just sit there and absorb what everyone around you is doing."

Hannibal shifts very slightly in his chair but makes no response and Will shuffles miserably from one foot to the other in the resulting strained silence, immediately regretting his outburst despite the fact he can't quite bring himself to apologise for it. "That is not entirely true," Hannibal eventually says. "Naturally I experience emotions. Perhaps not as enthusiastically as is typical, but they are there all the same. In fact rather more often than I would like – it is not always convenient. " Will frowns at this and Hannibal stares at him meditatively for a few moments before reaching out a hand. "Come here *mylimasis*," he says and then, when Will doesn't move: "Please."

Will sighs loudly but still walks over readily enough; and is about to pull up the chair opposite when he changes his mind halfway through and settles down at Hannibal's feet instead so he can rest his head against his knee, closing his eyes as he feels the long fingers beginning to card though his hair. "Remember when you used to massage my head?" he asks abruptly. It seems so long ago now; something to be viewed through the rose tinted lenses of nostalgia, as if things were much simpler back then – even though he knows they weren't. Not really.

"I do," replies Hannibal. He gives a gentle tug on Will's shirt. "In fact you were wearing this the first time I performed that particular service."

"How on earth can you remember little details like that?"

“I remember everything from those days,” says Hannibal, almost dreamily. “And from all the days that followed. I remember the way you used to lean against my desk with your hands in your pockets, or pace about the rug, or stare at me over the top of your glasses. So many recollections: they’re etched into my memory like calligraphy, each illuminated to its best advantage, stored away and set to music and I could recreate any one of them at a moment’s notice. All these little fragments of *you* – a look, a glance, a feeling – preserved for posterity more attentively than you could ever possibly know.” He briefly falls silent, and for a few moments there’s nothing except the sound of the fire crackling in the grate before he leans over and presses his face against Will’s hair. “Memory is a means of artistry *mylimasis*. It is an architect. With memory one can reconfigure reality and alter the shape of things into whatever one most wishes them to be. Regardless of what occurs in the future, I shall have a version of you that I can keep with me always.”

“I’m not really sure why you’d want me,” says Will, reaching behind him so Hannibal can take hold of his hand. “Especially for always. I’m actually fairly awful most of the time.”

“You are. And yet how I want you anyway.”

“I’m sorry I was so rude,” adds Will after a pause. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that.”

“I accept your apology, although doubtless I would have forgiven you without it. You’re rather unique in that regard Inspector Graham – I’ve always found myself granting you latitude that would be given to no one else.”

“Don’t tell me that. You’ll just encourage me.”

“I want to encourage you. I want you to attain and excel every possible constraint.”

Will falls quiet again and when he speaks his voice sounds slightly strained. “I’ve already started,” he says quietly. “Haven’t I? Exceeding my constraints.”

“You have.”

“What – that’s all you’ve got to say? No metaphors? No cryptic speeches?”

“Not on this occasion,” replies Hannibal. “The facts, after all, speak for themselves.”

“I suppose so,” says Will bleakly.

“Besides, you found me just now engaged in a series of conjectures of my own. Tonight my speeches are self-directed.”

“About what?”

“About the future. And what awaits there as the final pieces take their place on the board.”

“What are you talking about?” says Will, who’s beginning to be lulled into sleep by the warmth of the fire and the soothing way that Hannibal is stroking his hair. “What pieces?”

Hannibal, very uncharacteristically, sounds as if he's about to speak before changing his mind halfway through and falling silent; and Will cracks open an eye and peers up at him to try and interpret the source of the delay. "Nothing in particular my love," Hannibal finally replies. "Don't concern yourself – or at least save your concern until it is needed. I am speaking of metaphors only."

"You're so melodramatic," mutters Will fondly, burying his face against Hannibal's leg as sleep begins to overtake him. "You should go onto the stage. You'd give Sarah Bernhardt a run for her money."

"And yet how often does life acquire an element of the theatrical?" asks Hannibal thoughtfully. "The divine comedy. The epic tragedy. The way our lives veer from the script and how sometimes, despite one's best efforts, it grows impossible to predict the ending." He runs his finger down Will's cheekbone and then quotes softly: "'*Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthrals us*.'"

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The next day Will and Jack trudge over to the Whitechapel Hospital to begin the first round of interviews, suffused with something that's partly discouragement, partly hope, and partly reservation in case the latent hope proves itself unfounded. To avoid unwanted attention, or giving a potential suspect prior warning, the Ripper investigation isn't mentioned at all and Jack instead doles out a prepared speech about looking for witnesses for a series of thefts from the mortuary.

"What thefts?" demands the hospital warden, a spindly middle-aged man with a melancholy drooping face like a sheep. "*I* never heard anything about it. No one reported it to me."

"An informant," replies Will smoothly, secretly reflecting how the warden has a suitably bleating vocal register to match his sheep-like face. "We get a lot of tip-offs that way."

"It's all most irregular," says the warden in a tragic voice.

"Yes, well, if you could begin by getting us a list of employees," replies Jack, who's clearly getting ready to activate full-on 'Beware, ye mortals, for I am of Scotland Yard' mode.

"What, all of them?"

"Every single one," says Jack folding his arms.

"And their roles," adds Will. "We need names and positions. Dates of birth too, if you have them."

"I'm afraid we don't store that kind of information," says the warden tartly, although after a few more bleats of protest he retrieves the list from the back of an elderly filing cabinet and grudgingly hands it over. Jack practically snatches it out his hand then retires to the corner with Will to begin the process of crossing out the names of all female staff, followed by all the doctors (of which there are depressingly few for such a large hospital), and then

asterisking as a priority all those employed in any capacity with the morgue. “We may as well go alphabetically,” adds Jack in an undertone, before turning back to the warden and raising his voice. “We’d like to speak with John Anderson to begin with.”

“Oh, he’s left I’m afraid. I apologise – the list isn’t entirely up to date.”

“When did he leave?”

“Three months ago.”

Seeing as this clearly pre-dates the Tate murder Jack nods, finally satisfied, and crosses the name off the list. “Andrew Atkins?”

“Oh he’s still here, but you couldn’t possibly want to speak with him. He wouldn’t have heard anything – literally. I mean he’s a splendid old fellow but he’s 60 years old if he’s a day and as deaf as a post.”

Jack glances at Will, who nods, then crosses off the name as well. “Michael Bates?”

“Yes, he’s a good lad.”

“Lad?” says Will. “How old is he?”

“Fifteen.”

There’s a scratching sound as Jack’s pen gets to work; the warden glances at it in vague surprise. “The report indicated an older person was involved,” says Will blithely.

The next hour is similarly uneventful. Robert Bradley is the right age and currently employed as a mortuary assistant, but on being sent for reveals himself to walk with a crutch owing to a right leg twisted by polio. Simon Cahill was in the hospital the night Charlotte Tate was murdered – undergoing an operation for gallstones. Charles Collins is also too old and Jim Denton is likewise too young. Richard Davis has only been in London two months, having recently been transferred from a hospital in Brighton.

“This is proving easier than I thought,” says Jack good-naturedly to the warden, who gives a nervous bleating laugh in response. “So who’s up next…” He licks his thumb and then flicks over the sheaf of paper. “Francis Dolarhyde?”

“Yes sir, he’s still with us. Works in the mortuary.”

“Age?” asks Will.

“Late twenties I would say, perhaps a bit older.” The warden shrugs haplessly and repeats the bleating laugh. “I’m afraid I’m not very good at guessing how old people are.”

This is the exact same disclaimer he’s made for every individual they’ve asked about, which means Will has to confirm, yet again, that “An estimate is fine. And yes, we’d like to speak with him.”

“Tim,” calls the warden, upon which his clerk appears round the door: somewhat out of breath and pink-cheeked with irritation at all the unaccustomed running around he’s had to do. “Another errand for these gentlemen – fetch Mr Dolarhyde, if you please.”

“Who?”

“The mortuary worker.”

“Sir,” replies Tim sulkily, jamming both hands in his pockets. “Is that it now or will there be anyone else?”

Will glances at Jack, who checks his watch and frowns. “No, that’ll have to be it for today,” he says. “We’ll continue with the rest tomorrow.”

“And a bit less of your insolent tone young man,” adds the warden irritably. “That’s the Superintendent of Scotland Yard you’re speaking too.”

Will winces internally at these words, even though it’s too late and the damage is done. “Don’t worry about it,” he says quickly to Tim, in what he hopes is a soothing, casual voice. “Mr Crawford is only here as a small part of a larger enquiry. There’s no need to mention it to Mr Dolarhyde; he’s not in any trouble and we don’t want to worry him unnecessarily.”

“I don’t reckon he’ll be worried,” says Tim. “None of the others were.”

Wil and Jack exchange looks of disbelief. “You mean you’ve been *telling* them all?” says the warden. “And how on earth did you know in the first place? I say, you little scoundrel, have you been listening at the door?”

“It’s not a problem,” says Will, despite the fact it clearly is. “Tim, Mr Crawford and I have to leave anyway so perhaps you can show us down there yourself and we can speak to Mr Dolarhyde at his desk?”

“Gentlemen, I *do* apologise,” says the warden, practically wringing his hands.

“There’s no harm done,” says Will, frantically hoping that this is indeed the case. “None of the people he mentioned it to were relevant to the enquiry.” Not, of course, that this will have stopped them mentioning it to the others: probably half the hospital knows by now. He and Jack exchange another exasperated grimace and then silently troop after Tim to the sound of the warden’s bleating threats that if he mentions Scotland Yard to anyone else he’ll be out of a job.

“That’s quite a mouth you’ve got on you son,” says Jack severely. “Your instructions were to tell people we were here from Westminster CID.”

“I’m sorry sir,” replies Tim in a mournful voice. “I got a bit carried away. But it’s The Yard – it’s exciting isn't it?” He turns expectantly to Will. “Y’know?”

“No,” says Will.

“It is too though. I’ve read the magazines – you find missing jewels and rescue kidnapped royalty and stuff like that don’t you?” Undeterred by Will’s ‘*what do you think, you stupid shit?*’ eye-roll he adds: “Do they always send the top brass to solve crimes in hospitals? I thought you’d have bigger fish to fry?”

Will hesitates at this, because for some reason Hannibal’s previous remark has come veering into his mind – ‘*Fishing is a form of hunting, is it not? Necessitating planning, persistence and patience. Infinite patience. One sets the bait and casts the lure, then waits for the prey to ensnare itself on the line*’ – and in the end he just gives a vague nod and doesn’t actually answer. “The stolen equipment was very valuable,” replies Jack tersely. “And mind you don’t mention it to anyone else. Witnesses tend to get nervous when Scotland Yard’s involved and we don’t want to frighten people unnecessarily.”

“It’s always difficult for us to find members of the public who are discreet and intelligent enough to appreciate the covert nature of police work,” adds Will, having speedily deduced that the idea of being in league with Scotland Yard is going to guarantee this asshole’s cooperation far more effectively than threats or pleas are ever going to achieve. “So you’d be doing us a great favour by being subtle.” With considerable effort he musters a suitably earnest fake smile. “We’d be incredibly grateful to you.”

“Oh sir, yes *sir*,” says Tim, beaming with predictable pride. “I’m your man.” Jack gives Will an approving nod then pushes the mortuary door open as Tim slips through and calls out “Afternoon Mr Jenkins. Sorry to bother you again but these gentlemen want to speak to another one of your staff members – Mr Dolarhyde. Francis Dolarhyde. Is he around?”

An elderly man with a neatly clipped beard, who Will presumes to be the head pathologist, glances up from where he’s engaged in doing mysterious things involving a palette knife and a shiny steel tray of God-knows-what and narrows his eyes accusingly. “Back there,” he finally says, jerking his head over his shoulder. “At least he was when I last saw him.”

“And when was that?”

“About half an hour ago. Just before that lad…” he jerks his head again, this time in the direction of Tim, and the general impression is that of a dusty old marionette creaking into life and spasming on its strings. “Just before that lad came down to get Davis.”

“I’ll go fetch him for you,” says Tim, giving Will a conspiratorial wink. “You gentlemen wait here.” He vanishes through the swinging wooden door and Will sighs irritably to himself then lets his gaze track around the room, despite the fact it’s a rather depressing exercise in that the Whitechapel mortuary is a more run-down and poverty-stricken facsimile of every other mortuary he’s ever encountered: a gaping, gloomy and glacially cold chamber whose assorted ceramic and wrought-iron contraptions give it the appearance of a workshop whose sole source of manufacture is the murdered and deceased. A notable exception is a colourful cluster of postcards tacked to the wall above one of the sinks, all of which are reproductions of famous artworks that seem vaguely familiar, although he barely has a chance to run his eye over them before that tiresome bastard Tim returns, this time accompanied by a young mortuary attendant. “I’m sorry gentlemen,” says the latter, “but I can’t find Francis anywhere. He must have been called away.” Jack makes an irritated noise between his teeth. “I’m sorry sir. But there’s no knowing when a new body might come in. ‘Specially in an area like this.

Some days it's like the January Sales at Harrods." He laughs nervously and then promptly stops on realising that no one else is doing the same.

"Well, it can't be helped I suppose," says Jack peevishly. "We'll be along again tomorrow so can speak with him then."

"Been thieving has he?" asks the pathologist, abruptly creaking back to life.

"Not at all," replies Jack. "This is just a routine enquiry. We're speaking to everyone."

"Haven't spoken with me," says the pathologist beadily, obviously relishing the idea of someone getting into trouble that's not himself. Or perhaps, amends Will, it's just the hope of a bit of drama; which must, after all, be in little enough supply when your entire professional life involves categorising corpses.

"We will sir," he says now. "We're working through the employees alphabetically."

"Right you are," replies the pathologist, looking slightly disappointed. Then he pauses and peers closer at Will before the beady expression returns accompanied by a few determined head jerks. "Hey – hey! I know you, don't I? You're that American lad from *The Tattle Crime*."

Will grits his teeth and gives a vague non-comital smile, then deliberately turns away and gestures at Jack. "Back to the office then sir?"

"Yes, we're late enough as it is. Tim? Tim! Where are you son?" The latter reappears and Will silently vows that if he winks at him again he's getting the pathologist's steel tray, plus unspecified ungodly contents, clouted straight into his stupid face. "Tell the warden we'll return tomorrow," instructs Jack, "and, um, that we appreciate his help very much – hopefully the rest of the equipment will turn up soon. Come on then Mr Graham, let's be getting back."

"One minute," says Will in an undertone. "Where's that list gone?"

"Oh, yes, very good," concedes Jack. "Don't want to lose track of who we've spoken to."

"No," agrees Will tersely. Then he retrieves a pencil from a nearby desk and, very slowly and carefully, draws a thick black line beneath the name of Francis Dolarhyde.

*****

Later that evening Will returns to Whitechapel for yet another surveillance mission, doing his absolute best to remain attuned and alert despite the fact the excursions are rapidly losing their air of menace on the grounds that absolutely nothing ever happens. He and Zeller pitch up by the side of the square as usual and briefly get their hopes up after hearing angry roars coming from a nearby alleyway only to discover, on racing round the corner, that it's nothing more criminally minded than a group of drunken sailors home on shore leave who are squabbling over something unintelligible involving hemp – after which their cover is nearly blown when Will's American accent is overheard and creates suspicion, causing Zeller to improvise the excuse that they're drunk themselves, and at which point the sailors greet them

like long lost brothers and they end up having to stagger along Spitalfields joining in a mawkish rendition of ‘My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean’ until they can finally extricate themselves.

“Oh *God*,” says Zeller.

“At least they didn’t make us do the hornpipe,” says Will. “Be grateful for small mercies.” Across the road the sailors are now reciting ‘We are little lost lambs who have gone astray, baa baa baa’ and he gives a small shudder. “Or sing *that*.”

Zeller gives a snort of laughter. “Very true. I have to say, this is *really* not what I had in mind when I volunteered.” He pauses, then adds in a more serious voice: “It’s all gone so quiet. I thought he was supposed to strike again soon; isn’t that the whole reason were here?”

“I thought he would.”

“Perhaps something’s happened to him?” says Zeller hopefully.

“Perhaps. Or it might be that there’s someone in his life and he – or she – is acting as a temporary deterrent.”

“Temporary? You don’t think he’s going to stop then?”

“No,” says Will bleakly. “They never stop unless they’re forced to.”

“You’re clever aren’t you?” replies Zeller approvingly. “Mr Crawford’s always saying so.”

“Is he?” asks Will in surprise.

“Yeah – although he’ll never tell you to your face. It’s true though isn’t it?”

“Not really,” says Will, briefly thinking of Hannibal. “I know people who are far smarter than me.”

“Rubbish, don’t put yourself down so much. Anyway, hasn’t every initiative so far been your idea? The surveillance operation, the job interviews, the enquiries at Whitechapel Hospital?”

“Hasn’t caught him though has it?”

“Well it’s better than anything the rest of us came up with. Except for me of course; I still say the two of us and Mr Crawford in bonnets would have done the trick.” He and Will begin to cackle and then are promptly forced to sober up at the sight of Jack bearing down on them closely followed by Inspector Turner.

“Mr Graham. Mr Zeller,” says Jack, blowing vigorously into his hands. “Good lord it’s cold tonight. Anything to report?”

“Nothing sir.”

This makes Jack scowl at them both as if they're personally responsible. "No surprise there then," he says irritably. "Anyway it's eleven o'clock – time to switch over. Mr Zeller, you and Turner take the north side." He waves his arm towards one of the crumbling brick archways where a group of women have recently assembled and are now briskly pacing up and down. "Those ladies are, um, obviously here to do business."

"Look at them," says Inspector Turner in disgust. "*Flaunting* themselves."

"Actually I think they're just trying to keep warm," replies Jack sharply. "Mr Graham, what are you doing?"

"Sorry sir, I…I thought I saw something."

"Well did you or didn't you?"

Will hesitates and then shakes his head. "No. Trick of the light."

Jack grunts and then positions himself next to Will so they can face the opposite side of the square before silently offering him a swig from the customary bottle of brandy. Will accepts then tips his head back against the wall, scanning around for anything out of the ordinary or, failing that, of passable interest to while away the time. In this respect he's in luck because across the street are a series of wooden wagons with gaudy painted lettering announcing them to be part of a travelling circus and whose occupants are noisily and gleefully making their way into *The Ten Bells*. Will supposes they're taking a break for refreshments on their way to a more prosperous locale (the entertainment on offer being of a type that almost certainly no one round here would be able to afford) and he watches rather enviously at how carefree and exuberant they seem. Then a man brushes against the wagon's wooden flanks on his way past and the tarpaulin flutters aside to reveal a number of human figures that make Will stiffen with shock before realising they're only wax mannequins. Nevertheless the sight of them is still distinctly eerie: as if the wagon is some hideously surrealistic version of a medieval plague cart, heaped with lifeless bodies.

"Those'll get stolen," says Jack gloomily, nodding his head towards them.

"You're not suggesting we intervene if they are?"

Jack hesitates, obviously struggling with his policeman's instinct for preserving law and order. "No," says Will firmly. "We can't break cover over something as trivial as that."

"It's not trivial for whoever they belong to," replies Jack. "Although yes, I agree. Serious crimes *only*."

"Has that happened yet?"

"Yes, the first night. A man beating his wife – right there in the middle of the street. Inspector Brent had to…yes son, what is it?" He glares down irritably at the small boy who's suddenly materialised beside them and is busily engaged with tugging the hem of his coat. "I've no money to give you."

“Ain’t money I’m after,” says the child. “You Mr Crawford? I’ve a message for you.”

Jack and Will immediately go extremely still and exchange glances with each other. “What message?” asks Jack after a slight pause.

“Gentleman what’s wanting to speak with you. Name of JR. He says he’ll meet you in *The Ten Bells* – only you’re to go alone and wait for him.”

“*What* did you say?” snaps Jack. The child looks at him scornfully and then recites his message for a second time.

“Don’t sir,” says Will in an undertone. “It’s a hoax of some kind. I mean seriously – *JR*?” He raises his voice and then turns to the child. “Where’s this gentleman now?”

“Dunno. Ain’t nothing to do with me.”

“Can you ask him to come and meet Mr Crawford here?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I don’t know where he is. You can meet him or not, just as you like – I got my payment either way.” He takes a small coin from his pocket and spins it in their direction in a rather contemptuous way before turning round and vanishing again into the maze of alleyways.

“Oi! Come back here!” yells Jack.

“Leave him sir, he’ll be long gone,” says Will. “And he’s no good as a witness because there’s no way he was sent here by the person we’re looking for.”

“That’s as may be, but someone sent him,” replies Jack tersely. “And it wasn’t one of our own men – so who else knows we’re here?”

“That’s why I don’t think you should go. It might be a trap of some kind.”

“Pretty poor sort of trap with 50 odd witnesses,” says Jack, nodding towards the heaving crowds in *The Ten Bells*, many of whom are now raucously applauding an impromptu juggling demonstration by one of the circus performers. “I’m going to go – I’ll be just as safe in there as out here.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“You’ll do no such thing Mr Graham,” replies Jack, although in a kindly way. “I want you out here keeping an eye on things. If I’m not back in half an hour then come and take a look in the pub.”

“*Sir*,” says Will in exasperation, starting to feel as if their roles have been reversed and Jack is the maverick asshole whereas he’s the one with the string of police medals and a portrait of Queen Victoria behind his desk.

“Twenty minutes,” amends Jack. “And for what it’s worth I agree with you – I don’t think for one moment that I’m about to sit down and have a pint with Jack the Ripper. But I want to

know who's found out we're here."

"Then let him come to us."

"Calm down son. I doubt it's anything more alarming than a journalist."

"In which case you turning up is just going to add credibility to the story," says Will waspishly. "I thought the whole point of this was keeping it a secret?"

"Twenty minutes," repeats Jack. "I'm not a complete novice you know Mr Graham – I'm fairly confident I can handle whoever it is that's about to walk into *The Ten Bells*. But there's some sort of mystery going on here and I intend to get to the bottom of it." He claps Will briskly on the shoulder. "Now remember I need you covering the area, so I don't want you to shift out this spot before 20 minutes are up."

He tips his hat over his forehead and saunters off and Will watches him go with a blend of concern and irritation. Judging from the jaunty pace he actually seems to be enjoying himself, and Will supposes that he's probably as bored and restless as Will is and is relishing the chance of doing a bit of genuine detecting as opposed to slumping against a wall drinking brandy. In this respect Will is also undeniably curious, even though he's fairly convinced it'll turn out to be nothing more intriguing than some enterprising reporter from *The Tattle Crime*. Perhaps Jack might arrest them for wasting police time? Will's mind begins to wander off at the thought that he'll almost certainly get roped in to assist if so – and that some lurking photographer will doubtless get a picture of him and Jack falling out of *The Ten Bells* that'll later appear on the front page with a caption about Scotland Yard being rat-assed on the job – when something tugs against his coat and he gives a violent start. Glancing round it initially seems as if no one is there and it's only when he looks down that he experiences a sudden sharp chill of foreboding to realise that it's exactly the same child as before, his pale gaunt face gleaming eerily in the gaslight.

"You Will Graham?" he says. It's posed as a question but from the decided tone it's obvious that he knows exactly who Will is; which means, of course, that someone must have told him. The boy smirks faintly as if to confirm this, and the glimmer of sharp little teeth reminds Will for a surreal moment of Matthew Brown. "There's a man over there wants to talk to you," he adds, giving Will's coat another tug. "He sent me to fetch you – says you have to come with me and I show you where, and then he'll follow us."

Will can now feel the initial chill begin to curdle into something far fiercer and rawer; aware, even as his heart is pounding in a sick panicky way, of how the fear is spiced with something's that's very close to anticipation. A hound scenting the prey. "Yeah?" he says now, deliberately casual.

"Yeah."

Will narrows his eyes. "He sent you to get Mr Crawford out the way first, didn't he?"

"Said he wanted to get you on your own," replies the child. He jerks his thumb towards the maze of alleyways behind them and then falters slightly, screwing up his face with the effort of trying to remember the instructions. "He says to tell you that he's watching now and if you

talk to any of your copper mates then the deal's off. He says you come alone or you don't come at all. And he says don't try nothing 'cos he'll know."

"This man," says Will, precise and methodical even as his mind is racing. "What did he look like?"

"Dunno mister. He called out to me from the alleyway. He was in the shadows. I didn't see his face or nothing."

"What was his voice like?"

"Dunno," says the child. "He didn't sound like you."

"No, I don't expect he did. Did he sound like *you*? Local? As if he comes from round here?"

"Suppose so. Yeah."

"Was he confident?"

"What do you mean mister?"

"Okay, um, did he sound loud and cross? Or did he talk quietly?"

"Quiet. Soft like."

"Was he a scary person? Did he frighten you?"

"Take more than that to frighten *me*," says the child with boyish bravado that actually tells Will very little about the man in question. Although if he wanted to recruit the boy into doing him a service he would adopt a particular manner anyway, so it's probably not all that helpful.

"How tall was he?" he asks instead.

"Taller'n you."

"How much?" Will holds his hands out a few inches apart. "That much?"

"Less than that."

"Okay. Good. How big was he?" The child looks blank. "Did he seem strong?" Will glances around then points to the poster of the strong man on the side of the circus wagon, ludicrous with his waxed moustaches and stripy leotard. "Was he as big as him?"

"Naw," says the child scornfully. "Not like that."

Okay, so: not markedly overwhelming as a physical opponent, yet with a new element to add to the profile that everyone has clearly underestimated. *Cunning*. Far more cunning than Will would have credited him for, to have devised this elaborate scheme with the child. And yet the crime scenes themselves testify to an equally unassailable trait of profound

disorganisation and immaturity. A fragmented personality then? Someone who descends into a particularly chaotic psychological state when killing that alters from his customary one? Or vice versa? Then Will draws in a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm and think clearly; aware of the irony that he's about to do something infinitely more reckless than what he was criticising Jack for so soundly, yet likewise reluctant to forfeit a golden chance – possibly the *only* chance – of coming face to face with Jack the Ripper. And it's not as if he hasn't confronted killers of less renown but equal viciousness and lived to tell the tale every single time. He surreptitiously brushes his palm against the revolver in his coat pocket – double-checked this evening and definitely loaded – then turns round again to face the child. "Okay, now listen. That man you spoke to: I think he might want to have an argument with me. And if that happens I'll need my friends to help me out. Do you understand? Have you ever been in a fight with another boy and you wished your friends could come and help you?"

"Yeah, I reckon."

"Well it's just like that. Now I know he's watching us, so I can't show you, but across the street behind me there's a very tall man with dark hair. Tall and thin and wearing a long grey coat. His name's Mr Zeller. I want you to wait here and if I'm not back in five min…" Oh God, of course the child's not going to have a watch. "Can you count?" says Will.

"Naw."

"Okay. Okay, um, can you hear the piano in *The Ten Bells*?"

"Course I can mister, I ain't deaf."

"You recognise the songs? Can you tell them apart?"

"Reckon I can. Plays the same bleeding thing every night."

"That's good – that's great. Now I want you to bend one of your fingers each time a new song starts and if I'm not back by the time you've bent these," Will gestures to own index, ring, and middle finger, "then I want you to go and tell the man in the dark coat. Say Mr Graham sent you and tell him what's happened. He's very kind, he'll give you some money. And if I come back before then I'll give you some money myself. But it's *very important* that I talk to the man first, so don't get Mr Zeller before it's time. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," says the child.

Will wonders, rather desperately, if he really does understand but is unable to improvise anything better in the time available. On cue there's another impatient tug to his coat and Will draws a final deep breath then turns to face the child; horribly aware, even as he's reaching towards the first genuine opportunity to end this living nightmare, that he could be just about to make the single biggest mistake of his life. Then he stares numbly into the shadows that ooze and seep from the alleyways, knowing that for all the hours poring over paperwork, for all the autopsies, even for his own blighted empathy and dark imagination, that he still doesn't *truly* understand exactly what it is that's hiding there.

"You coming or what mister?" snaps the child. "He said not to keep him waiting."

Will glances down at him. Beyond the square he can hear the bells of St. Thomas' beginning to toll out midnight and the heavy chimes suddenly strike him as dark and ominous, the way they might sound out for a funeral – the way they *would* have sounded out when Charlotte Tate was laid to rest, or Marianne Taylor, or any of the other innocent women torn into tatters by this creature who's so far eluded every possible attempt at capture. And he knows, in that moment, what he has to do.

"Yes," replies Will, low yet firm. "Yes – I'm coming."

Chapter End Notes

With some obvious exceptions, the items on the two lists are probably largely attributable to the real-life Jack the Ripper.

Well, the response to the last chapter was…interesting. For all those anons who sent me angry ranting messages along the lines of 'Hannibal would never bottom, how dare you,' I suggest you read this. Now chill out. And put the lotion in the basket or else you'll get the hose again.

Seriously though – chill out. This is smutty fanfic not War and Peace. Plus I'm guessing anyone who's read this far must be at least somewhat invested in the story, so bear in mind that the fact the updates have slowed down to fortnightly since I had to start moderating the comments is not a coincidence. I'm an inexperienced writer and aggressive complaints and criticism do nothing for my motivation and energy levels, especially for a complex fic like this. If you don't like it there's lots of lovely free content to read instead (remember that God invented the back button on your internet browser for a reason).

TL;DR:

Dr Lecter: making requests/suggestions for particular scenes; pointing out typos and other errors; disagreeing with things in a friendly way; general constructive criticism.

Dr Chilton: everything else.

And finally in other news…that moment when you confess to your friend that you're writing Hannibal fanfic and he looks appalled because he thinks you're talking about Anthony Hopkins and Edward Norton.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Hey my lovelies, sorry this one is so late :-(Same reasons as before I'm afraid, but as always rest assured that this fic is not going to be left unfinished (it will, after all, take a bit more than angry anons and a faltering writing mojo to stop Sassy Victorian Will and the Sad Orphan Bullshit Face).

And speaking of which The Grand Finale has now officially started, so I'm going to give a general warning now for recurring scenes of physical violence and psychological threat/dread across the remaining chapters. This one has both in the opening section, so please read with care (if in doubt just skip straight to the first chapter break – you'll be able to catch up on the plot from the next scene onwards).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will follows behind the child in grim silence, uncomfortably aware of how the festive raucous noises of the square are growing increasingly dim and faint as the pair of them plunge deeper into the squirming maze of alleyways. It's started to rain again and the drops set up a relentless pounding rhythm that ricochet off the crumbling bricks and course against Will's face in clammy rivulets as all around him the walls soar up skyward, lurching in crazy disarray from where subsidence and general neglect has made them swell and sag. In turn they're so blackened – so sullied and corroded from years of soot and coal dust – that they give the illusion of blending into the dark sky and no matter where he looks all he can see are curdling shadows with the occasional misty sliver of moon. There's a fierce smell of despair and decay: relics of other people's wretched lives and deaths.

"There," says the child abruptly. Drawing to a halt he raises an arm, bleached pale and thin as a bone in the moonlight, and gestures towards a narrow passage that cuts between two decomposing archways like a slash in the bricks. "He said you're to wait for him."

"All right," replies Will. His voice feels hoarse from lack of use, as if he's already been gone so long from the normal world that he's forgotten how to apply it. Or maybe it's just the fetid atmosphere that's catching at the back of his throat and imbuing the air itself with a bitter, rusty taste. "I understand," he adds in a deliberately firmer tone. "Do you remember what I told *you*?" But there's no answer and when he swings round the child has already vanished, melting away amongst the dripping shadows like a pool of spilt ink.

Will curses softly under his breath then straightens his shoulders and takes a step forward, then a second: one foot in front of the other – methodical, purposeful – and determinedly focusing on nothing but the mechanics of motion (*left* foot, *right* foot) until he's moved down the length of the passage and entered a murky alcove with several other alleyways veering off from it. It's rather like reaching the centre of a maze and the miserable irony of the analogy is

not lost on him: the labyrinth with its very own monstrous Minotaur lurking amid the warren of crumbling bricks, hopeless dead ends and decaying corridors of withered stone. The Ripper's territory. His hunting ground. And like it or not the darkness at the centre is now absolute: so dark there's scarcely even shadows anymore, just an expanse of blank black emptiness as the light seeps away and the moon slowly suffocates behind the choking fog.

Beached and stranded in the darkness Will desperately strains his ears for any signs of human life, because he has a vague sense that if he could just hear the noises from the square (the piano in *The Ten Bells*, the shouts of the circus performers) he'd feel a little less alone. It would be like clutching a piece of Ariadne's thread; a link back to normality, however fragile. But there's nothing except the drumming of the rain and his own lurching heartbeat, so he takes a deep breath to steady himself as he restlessly shifts his weight from one leg to the other. Despite his best efforts the fear and apprehension have become like a sliver of steel stabbing straight in his chest and the sensation reminds him of a recent article on Mr Darwin's new theories about the survival response set: *fight, flight, or freeze*. Will himself could be a living exemplar, with every nerve twitching and each muscle straining from the urge to run and yet, despite refusing to do so, having nothing palpable to fight and thus no clear remaining option but to freeze in place with lethally glacial fear. Clenching his fists into his pockets he takes another deep breath, urging himself into some semblance of calmness as he waits – and it's at that exact moment that an eerily low voice comes slithering out of the darkness and whispers: "*Mr Graham*."

The voice is decidedly unusual: clotted and thick-sounding, as if the mouth is too full of teeth, yet also curiously mechanical and lacking the range and richness of typical human speech. Will is helpless to stop himself stiffening with shock at the sound of it as his eyes dart frantically around to detect its source although by a huge force of effort he manages to keep his body composed and still. "Yes," he replies after a short pause.

"You should know that I'm pointing a gun at you," continues the voice. How calm it sounds – tranquil, almost, for all its rigid impassiveness. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," repeats Will in a flat dead voice of his own, even though his heart is beginning to throb again in a sick panicky way as his skin starts to prickle and one by one every single hair on the back of his neck stands on end. He never anticipated this – never even imagined it – because firearms are rare and expensive and knives are the Ripper's weapon of choice. How is it even *possible* that he's holding Will at gunpoint? Images of Freddy Lounds, the last male victim, begin to veer through his mind – burned alive; half his face sliced off – and he briefly screws his eyes closed in a physical effort to banish them.

"Do you know who I am?" asks the voice and Will realises, rather surreally, that he's beginning to think of it as a separate sentient thing; as if it's distinct from the man himself and could crawl across the alleyway any moment like a wraith and wrap its clawed clammy hands around Will's throat. And yet it's difficult not to imbue it with such sinister properties when it's so grinding and insistent and so very horribly pervasive. Logically he knows it's just a trick of acoustics, an illusion created by the narrow dip of the stone and the pounding of the raindrops, but The Voice sounds as if it's coming from all four directions at once; as if it's everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time.

By now Will's fear is like a knife twisting into his lungs, slowly and excruciatingly, like a living thing spectating the scene: a corporeal presence detached from Will himself, just as The Voice is independent of its owner. Nevertheless he forces himself to remain still and respond to the question. "I know who you are," he replies steadily. "Yes."

"*No*," hisses The Voice; and this time there's a thrill of anger beneath the previous mechanical tone, grating and rasping like rusty metal. In spite of himself, Will flinches. "*No*. You only think that you do."

Will darts his eyes back and forth for a second time but it's still impossible to tell where the sound is coming from: nothing to see at all except the occasional streaks of shadow that heap in the corners like piles of reeking sediment. "So tell me then," he says boldly. "Tell me who you are."

A short pause follows this question in which even the shadows seem to be holding their breaths before a response finally comes. "No Mr Graham," grinds out The Voice. "That is not the right question. You should not ask me who I am. You should *ask me what I am becoming.*"

Will glances up sharply at this, intrigued – despite the horror of the physical situation – by the intellectual implications of the disclosure as Hannibal's summation of the Ripper fleetingly runs through his mind: '*Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, And one is striving to forsake its brother*.' The way the dark eyes swivelled to Will's face immediately after the quotation…'*Rather like you*.' He clears his throat for a second time and stares defiantly in front of him. "So what are you becoming?"

There's a silence, and then: "I wonder if you would understand?" says The Voice. "It is a great thing; *a very great thing*. A miracle." Another pause follows this statement and when The Voice appears again there's a rough, guttural inflection woven through it that makes Will want to wince. "You've been looking for me Mr Graham. Haven't you?

"Yes. You know I have."

"At least – you've been looking for the body I currently occupy. They hunt me because of the way I made those women change. *And they insult me for it*." Once again the surge of anger is clearly audible. "They call me demeaning names."

"I know," replies Will carefully. "You told me so in your letter. That you'd been misrepresented in the press; just like me."

"Like you?" repeats The Voice. "*No*. You think we're speaking here tonight as equals but you are mistaken. You are only a man Mr Graham. I have become…Other."

The tone in which this is announced is such a blighted blend of menace and foreboding that it somehow succeeds in being more disturbing than the actual words, unnerving as they are in themselves. Will darts his tongue over his lips, summoning every last atom of self-command in order to remain poised and unwavering as he forces himself to continue staring into the darkness. "What do you mean?" he says when no other elaboration is forthcoming. "Explain it to me."

“I am not a man. I began as one but now I am becoming something more. As you will witness.” This time nearly a full minute passes before The Voice abruptly scrapes back to life and Will spends it in a state of tortured anticipation, acutely aware of the way he’s being scrutinised from the depths of the shadows by a hidden pair of eyes. “As a man, Mr Graham, it is in your nature to do one thing correctly: to show fear. So tell me – are you frightened?”

In the resultant silence the moon creeps out from behind the clouds and it's then, for a few agonised seconds, that Will finally sees it: the outline of a figure in the alcove opposite; tall and broad, unnaturally still...and facing straight towards him. The sight of it is deeply shocking in its vivid, visceral intensity – all the more for being so unexpected – and in spite of himself Will takes a step backwards. “Yes,” he eventually replies. Pride makes him want to deny it, but the man – *the Ripper* – so obviously demands respect that it’s pointless to anger him with a futile display of bravado.

Nevertheless the concession still fails to appease The Voice because there’s a sharp hiss of breath before it echoes out again into the night: “That is the wrong answer. You do not owe me fear Mr Graham. You owe me *awe*.”

Killing makes him feel God-like, thinks Will, rather wildly. *No wonder he doesn’t want to stop – why would you give that up?* The Voice is curdling now, distorting into something like a snarl and Will quickly dips his head in response, ostensibly making a show of respectfully acknowledging the words but really because he’s trying to get a better glimpse of what the figure’s doing. The rain’s *so* heavy now, streaming across everything like tears: as if the moon itself is weeping and watering the earth at the sight of so much human misery. *Jesus, keep it together,* mutters Will to himself. *Keep it together; you’ll never walk out of here if you don’t*. To devise the best point of exit it’s essential to calculate the angle at which the gun is being held so he stares intensely ahead as the clouds finally shift aside again to permit another narrow shaft of moonlight. Then his heart begins to quicken once more, only this time from hope rather than fear: because despite the shadows he can still make out that the figure’s arms are hanging rigid by its sides rather than pointing towards him and, far more importantly, there’s no tell-tale gleam to indicate a weapon. Will’s eyes narrow and his breath hitches with anticipation. Bluffing then, about being armed – bluffing the entire time.

Will’s already experienced freeze, and flight isn’t an option when justice can still be done, but fight…fight has just become a genuine possibility. Because no gun means the rules have shifted; it means the game has changed. *You evil bastard*, thinks Will with a surge of repulsion. *This stops – it stops right here*. The figure looks hefty and strong but there’s still much to be gained from the element of surprise, and a sudden ambush pitched quick and hard promises a good chance of success. Doesn’t it? He has to believe that it does. With an artful subtlety of his own Will pivots on his heels to gain some traction then waits for the next shaft of moonlight before arching his back and abruptly springing forward, reaching into his pocket for his own gun as he does so. The distance is short and adrenaline lends a fleetness and suppleness that enable him to cover the ground in unnaturally quick time as he darts out to seize hold of the figure and pound it to pieces against the crumbling bricks. He wants to give a shout of anger as his fingers grip down yet the sound catches in his throat before he can even utter it because something’s not right. Something’s wrong – oh God, something’s *really wrong*. And as Will spins the figure towards him he’s helpless to suppress the cry of fearful revulsion as he realises that the whole thing was a trap from the start and what he’s

now clasping isn't a human being at all, but rather one of the wax mannequins from the circus cart. As the head swivels round its lifeless eyes gaze at him above a red painted mouth that curls in a hideous rictus grin and he flings it away from him in horror at exactly the same moment as an arm – incredibly strong; unfeasibly so – grips round his throat from behind.

"You are privy to a great becoming," snarls The Voice, straight into Will's ear. "And yet you recognize *nothing*."

Will gives a frantic jerk, desperately kicking out as he tries to pull himself free – fighting for real now, fighting for his life – only to abruptly fall still at the unmistakable sensation of a knife digging against his spine. "Listen Mr Graham," murmurs The Voice, white-hot and ruthless as the blade presses harder. "Can you hear it?"

In that moment Will can hear nothing except the wild pulsation of his own heartbeat and he shakes his head numbly. The fear is so thick now it's like being smothered, like being beaten across the head with rusty blood-stained metal. *I'm going to die*, thinks Will with blind panic. *He's going to kill me*. "Listen…listen," croons The Voice; and it suddenly strikes Will that showing the true extent of the fear could prove lethal and so goes completely rigid instead, forcing himself to focus and listen until he can hear it. *It* being screams.

They start off faint at first but grow louder and louder, wild and terrified like something in an abattoir as its life leaks away: a scream of mortal terror. Will flinches with shock at the sound of it and it's at that exact point that the screams are overshadowed, dying away as the shouts begin instead: "It's the Ripper!" yells a female voice. "The Ripper! He's struck again!" It's panicked and fevered with dread, catching and breaking off before renewing in a stream of pleading sobs: "Oh God, oh God, *ohGodohGodohGod*."

"Do you know what it is?" murmurs The Voice. "It is the sound of inevitability." As Will stares ahead in silent horror the knife is slowly pulled away from his back and brandished in front of his face instead, glistening black and wet in the moonlight with fresh blood. The hand grasping it is large and powerful-looking, obscured behind a leather glove that's likewise heavily bloodstained and Will gives a choked-off groan as it begins to stroke the flat side of the blade against his cheek in order to smear the blood across it.

"Do you think I'm going to kill you?" asks The Voice. "I'm not. You should be grateful; I've chosen you for a great honour."

"What?" grits out Will. His teeth are so rigidly clenched it's difficult to get the words out and he gives another desperate twist, aware that freeing himself is impossible yet unable to bear the sensation of the dripping knife against his face. An urge to scream is churning beneath his rib cage now, wild and fatal, yet he's afraid to open his mouth too widely in case the blood runs into it. "*What?*" he snaps again. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to tell people about me," replies The Voice, its breath hot and rank against Will's skin. "I want you to tell them to prepare themselves."

"For what?"

For a few seconds there's no reply and Will is about to renew his frantic struggling when the growling sound suddenly begins: guttural and thick, loud enough to drown out the screams and the shouts and even Will's pounding heart; an inhuman snarl that sounds like it's been ripped straight *From Hell* – just as the letter promised. "For what?" hisses The Voice, "*For the coming of The Dragon*." And then Will is being seized by the hair and his head jerked back before being slammed forward again into the brick…and then it's all shock and pain and terror, and then there's nothing at all except darkness.

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In his mind, Will is fishing. He thinks it might be the Potomac River again although really it could be anywhere: just a peaceful expanse of reeds that dip their heads and gracefully weave along the bankside as the trees filter flecks of sunlight onto his face and the water's so clear he can see the stones at the bottom. Someone is repeating his name in an urgent way and Will scowls and shakes his head, determined to stay where he is rather than be dragged back into any more horror and fear. "Go away," he says now, "leave me alone." His voice in his own ears sounds deformed – garbled and coagulated as if his tongue has swollen up – although it's still not as disturbed or disturbing as the *actual* Voice. "Bastard," adds Will defiantly. Now he can feel someone's hand cradling his face and someone repeating "Will, *Will*," in an unusually persistent tone and he shakes his head again, loathe to abandon the sun and the reeds and the way the water sounds as if it's chuckling as it eddies and swirls across the stones. "Come back Will," says the voice; and it's a bit clearer now so that he can hear the rich smoky edge to the vowels. In fact it sounds like it ought to be Hannibal's voice, although surely it can't *actually* be (can it?). Will's eyes abruptly snap open before helplessly sinking closed again.

"What's the matter with him?" Sergeant Matthews is asking in a high, frightened tone.

"He's had a nasty blow to the head," replies Price. "A little quieter please Sergeant, we don't want to unsettle him."

"He's covered in blood."

"Most of it's not his. It's all right – we'll get him cleaned up in a minute. The landlady's fetching some water as we speak."

"But he's so pale."

"He's in shock," says Price, shooing Sergeant Matthews away. "Dr Lecter, what do you think to some *sal volatile*?*"*

"No, not with a head injury. Do we know how long he was in the alleyway for?"

"Mr Zeller reckons about 15 minutes."

"As long as that?" replies Hannibal, his voice icy cold with anger. "I must say Mr Crawford, this has all been managed extraordinarily badly. I understood a basic precaution for this operation was that no officers were to ever be left alone?"

“They weren’t,” agrees Jack, with a hint of defensiveness. “But the circumstances were highly unusual. I was deliberately misled.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal in a withering tone. “*Clearly*.”

“He wasn't completely alone,” blusters Jack, who's now starting to falter under the intensity of Hannibal's stare.“Mr Zeller was only a few feet away. And with respect Dr Lecter, you’re going beyond your area of expertise: it’s one thing to speculate about these people from an academic perspective and quite another to be confronted with them in the middle of the field. That maniac knew exactly what he was doing.”

“Indeed,” snaps Hannibal. “And therefore all the more reason to follow your own safety protocols.”

“Yes, well…it’s easy to say that *now*, but if *you’d* been called upon to make a similar decision…”

“Calm down gentlemen,” says Price soothingly. “There’s no need for either panic *or* recriminations. Mr Graham has proved himself indestructible on numerous occasions – in fact I’m fairly sure we could drop him out the window now and he’d simply bounce straight up again. Besides, he’s such a modest soul; think how mortified he’s going to be to regain consciousness and find you two hissing at each other over him like a pair of old tom cats. He’d probably pass out again.” He gives Will a gentle pat on the cheek. “And look, you see, he’s starting to wake up. Welcome back young man, you gave us all quite a scare.”

Will blinks a few times and tries to haul himself upright before a sharp surge of pain makes him groan and sink back down onto the sofa. “If you’re going to be sick there’s a bucket over here,” adds Price in a matter-of-fact way.

“Where am I?”

“In the top room of *The Ten Bells*,” says Price, beginning to dab at Will’s face with a damp cloth. “Mr Zeller found you and brought you straight over.”

“How?” asks Will, hazy and confused until his memory finally gives a sluggish twinge. “That boy?"

“Yes, he’s a bright lad, he did very well. And thank heavens you had the foresight to give him your instructions – I’m not sure we’d have got to you otherwise.”

“He was generously rewarded,” adds Hannibal. “Deservedly so.” He leans over Will, ostensibly to check his pulse but really so he can stroke his cheek without the others seeing.

“I don’t understand,” says Will, aware of his fingers twitching with a childish urge to grasp hold of Hannibal’s hand. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Mr Crawford arranged it,” pipes up Sergeant Matthews before Hannibal can answer. “He thought you’d want a friend close by. He paid for the messenger and the carriage for Dr Lecter himself.”

Will falters at this, on one level touched with gratitude for the consideration but also consumed with anxiety at the reasoning behind such a lavish gesture – tantamount, after all, to sending for next of kin. To go to such trouble…surely he can't *know*? Jack pulls his chair closer to the sofa then blinks at Will benignly, giving nothing away. "I thought you deserved some expert medical attention," he adds, as if trying to alleviate Will's fears.

"Thank you Mr Crawford," says Price. "How terribly gratifying."

"Don't be like that Jim. You'd be the first to admit that all your experience nowadays is with corpses."

"Well he looked like a corpse when they brought him in," says Price, giving Will's hair a kindly ruffle and oblivious to how the gesture makes Hannibal's eyes narrow into little slits. "I'm afraid you're going to have a bit of a sore head for the next few days young man. You've got some shocking bruising and a nasty cut on your forehead. Dr Lecter had to sew you up again – the old stitches burst when your face was slammed against the wall."

Will swallows audibly. From the strained atmosphere in the room he already knows the answer to his next question but can't stop himself asking regardless. "You didn't…get him?" he says hesitantly, hardly daring to hope.

"We didn't," replies Jack in a grim voice and Will gives a wordless nod, immediately aware of how the mood has plummeted even further as the initial relief in his recovery dissolves away and something far darker takes his place: blunt and unambiguous as if someone had blown out all the candles.

"He had a busy night…" begins Price. His voice trails off and he rubs a hand over his forehead.

"There's no easy way to say it," adds Jack. "Two more women are dead."

For a few seconds Will's stomach churns so badly he thinks he might have need of Price's bucket after all. "*Two*?" he says faintly.

"Yes. The injuries were far less severe on the first victim; we think something happened to disturb him and he had to abandon her body before he could mutilate it. The second one though…" Jack shakes his head then lets out a bitter sigh. "Right under our noses."

"Oh God," says Will. He closes his eyes for a few seconds then grimaces before opening them again and slowly turning his head to look at Jack. "I'm sorry sir. I really am. I handled the whole thing so badly."

"You made it out that hell hole alive," replies Jack in an unusually gentle voice, "which I'd say is a pretty good result. Don't blame yourself for this Mr Graham – from Dr Price's estimate he'd already killed them both before he sent that child to talk to us. There was nothing we could have done." He gives another heavy sigh, his fingers drumming fretfully against his knee. "We tried to get a description out of the boy but he says he never saw his face."

“I know, he told me the same thing. And I didn’t see him either; he was in the shadows the whole time. His *voice* though. I’d recognise his voice anywhere.”

“It’s unbelievable,” adds Jack in a tone that’s uncharacteristically thin and strained. “How he managed it.” He pauses and catches Will’s eye. “We underestimated him didn’t we?”

“I know. We did. He’s far more cunning than I would ever have given him credit for.”

“Or at least an *aspect* of him is,” says Hannibal. “By your own admission, Mr Crawford, he was interrupted before he could mutilate his first victim. Once again he shows he has neither the restraint nor foresight to plan his crimes in a way that guarantees successful completion. And yet in approaching yourself and Mr Graham the way he did…” his hand briefly strays against the side of Will’s wrist, “he demonstrates an element of guile.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that this is someone at war with himself. Just as Mr Graham has always said.”

Will nods slowly, unable to stop his mind recreating a shadowy duplicate of the creature in the alleyway: the grandiosity, the terrifying sense of purpose amid omens of further horror to come. Agony and ecstasy. “He’s not going to stop Mr Crawford,” he finally says. “He’ll never stop on his own. We need to catch him.”

“I know son,” replies Jack. “We’re doing everything we can.” His expression is grimly resolute yet his actual tone sounds far from convinced; more as if he’s rehearsing the sort of sentiment he feels he *ought* to have rather than what he genuinely believes.

“He told me something,” adds Will, catching at Jack’s sleeve as he’s turning to go. “Before he knocked me out. He told me we need to prepare ourselves.”

“For what?”

“For the coming of The Dragon.”

“Good lord,” says Price faintly.

“We’ll get him,” repeats Jack in the same weary voice. “And in that respect I should head back outside; Whitechapel’s like a war zone tonight. Jim, you and Sergeant Matthews come too. I want you overseeing the finger-tip searches.”

“Who’s managing it at the moment?” asks Will.

“We drafted in extra men as soon as it happened. The Chief Superintendent himself is here, plus seven inspectors taking witness statements and some of our best sergeants. You, on the other hand, should get yourself home immediately Mr Graham. You had a near miss tonight. A very near miss.” He hesitates then pats Will’s shoulder and turns to face Hannibal. “Look after him won’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Can you walk?” adds Jack to Will who, to his extreme frustration, finds that he actually can’t. In the end Hannibal goes ahead to find a cab while Jack carries Will downstairs, clutching him with a cautious yet self-conscious protectiveness as if he’s had a large basket of eggs thrust into his arms. The street outside is a world away from the frivolous, celebratory atmosphere of previously: heaving with policemen, illuminated by the sulphurous reek of gaslights that make the fog appear as if it’s smouldering and with every face in Will’s line of vision wearing the same look of blanched, fearful horror. The shrill wail of police whistles is almost deafening, punctuated by shouts and the occasional sobbing noise.

“It’s like a scene from Dante’s hell,” says Price grimly and Will, remembering the directions on the letter – *From Hell* – gives an involuntary shudder. Across the square the cart of mannequins look as if they’re grinning at him and he can’t help feeling relieved when Hannibal appears a few minutes later with a hansom cab. With considerable effort he levers himself into it then slumps across the seat with his head on Hannibal’s knee, struggling against the waves of nausea that wash over him every time the carriage rocks across a particularly uneven stretch of cobblestones.

“Try and bear it just a little longer,” says Hannibal, who’s gone unusually quiet as he rubs slow, soothing circles across Will’s shoulders.

“I could have put an end to this tonight,” mutters Will, his voice pale and strained with pain. “I should have got him.”

“It was not possible. If you could have done so you would.”

“He’s still out there Hannibal. I messed up *badly*.”

“No, you were forced into a situation over which you had no real control; the entire scenario was designed to place you at a disadvantage. Yet he clearly craves contact with you, which in itself makes it likely that an opportunity for a reckoning shall arise. And if I find him first,” adds Hannibal in a cold hard voice, “then I shall kill him myself. A death without mercy or restraint, just as he deserves.”

Will shakes his head with a faint groaning sound, obviously anxious at the idea of Hannibal being exposed to the horrific figure from the alleyway, and Hannibal obediently falls silent again and renews the rhythmic stroking movement across his back and shoulders until the carriage finally draws up outside Harley Street. Once inside he carries Will upstairs then checks his pulse and pupil responsiveness before giving him a few drops of laudanum and tenderly laying him down on the bed. Will tugs at Hannibal’s wrist and mutters something indistinct, and Hannibal makes another soothing sound and adorns his face and hands with soft kisses until he finally falls asleep. Then he lies down beside him and runs his eyes over Will’s damaged face, his expression hardening. The hour is so late it’s more accurate to deem it early yet sleep doesn’t feel like a viable option because Will is injured – and therefore vulnerable and in need of protection – and so Hannibal opts to wait out the night instead, wary of anything that might occur to disturb or unsettle this most precious of burdens. In doing so he can't help reflecting, somewhat wryly, at the ludicrousness of this impulse given that there's nothing tangible on hand to actually threaten Will; and yet how the urge to do so exists nonetheless. Guarding the beloved. A territorial instinct, one might call it; something primitive and possessive. Hannibal sighs and rolls his eyes at himself but still makes no

attempt to sleep in preference of maintaining his silent vigil, moving only to soothe Will into calmness at each sign of bad dreams with the tenderness of any ministering night nurse. *Look what you have done to me Will Graham*, thinks Hannibal, slightly amused. *You have managed to subvert every expectation I have about myself – and yet I can't bring myself to begrudge you your success.*

One by one the hours creep by as the night crawls towards morning and over Harley Street the moon roams across the horizon: rising higher and higher before gradually starting to sink again as tattered grey clouds blow across the sky and the tip of the sun begins to bleed its first faint streaks of scarlet eastward…just as the crack of breaking slates sounds out across the house. Hannibal darts straight upright, straining his ears in the darkness to determine the source of the noise before automatically spinning round to check on Will: curled up next to him and still completely insensate from shock and adrenaline. Hannibal waits a few more seconds for any further noise then gently removes Will from beneath his arm and pulls on a housecoat before gliding silently downstairs, fuelled with a surge of savage protectiveness. The sound still fails to repeat itself and everything appears as it ought to, but he continues to move from one room to the other in swiftly fearless inspection before opening the front door and scanning up and down the street. The air is choked and murky with fog but his sharp eyes are still able to pick out a figure in the distance: swirling in a long dark coat and determinedly making its way in the direction of Cavendish Square. As Hannibal watches the figure pauses for a few moments, hovering in the half-light like an insect, before spinning round and renewing its rapid motion. There's nothing inherently suspicious about it – night time is no barrier to the need of doctors' services after all, and Harley Street is rarely ever completely deserted – yet Hannibal still frowns at the sight of it. Confrontation is one thing after all, even a desirable thing, and yet it makes no sense to gift an opponent with an avoidable tactical advantage. Closing the door firmly behind him, he makes a mental note to have Mary send for an ironmonger as soon as possible in order to reinforce the locks.

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Contrary to everyone's expectations Will, who is fierce, resilient and – courtesy of a steady supply of luxurious cuisine – increasingly hale and strong, makes a surprisingly rapid recovery and is ready to return to Scotland Yard after only two days' convalescence. In this respect the pursuit of the Ripper has acquired a new sense of urgency and Will fastens his tie on his first morning back with a rather violent determination, almost as if he's imagining the way the hangman might tighten the noose at the gallows of Pentonville.

"So eager to renew the hunt?" says Hannibal with interest.

"Of course."

"Most people would be deterred after such an encounter."

"Not me. He needs to be stopped."

"And you feel the onus is on you to do so? Understandable I suppose. It is more personal now isn't it? More…intimate."

"I don't see it as some sort of vendetta if that's what you mean," says Will irritably.

“Perhaps. But are you sure *he* doesn’t see it that way?”

Will doesn’t reply immediately and Hannibal strolls over and finishes fastening his tie for him. “Thanks,” says Will before adding, more hesitantly: “You don’t have to worry about me. I don’t intend to take any unnecessary risks.”

“I am not unduly worried on that score. But you need to keep your wits about you Will. You are dealing with an extremely desperate and dangerous individual.”

“I know,” says Will bleakly. Memories of his silent requiem on the bridge have come to mind – the reflections on the Dark Twin – and what he thinks, but doesn’t add, is: *So is he*. Then he pulls his hat over his forehead to stop passers-by staring at the riotous array of bruises before striding off towards Scotland Yard consumed with a grittily grim sense of purpose. Everyone seems pleased to see him and Jack, initially concerned at such an early return, expresses an admiration for Will’s toughness that’s clearly seasoned with guilt at what he sees as his own culpability at Will ending up in the alleyway in the first place. As a matter of priority they agree to resume interviewing at the Whitechapel Hospital and trudge over there mid-morning where they’re greeted rather cautiously by the warden whose sheep’s face seems to have acquired an additional air of drooping melancholy in the interim.

“Goodness me young man,” he says once Jack and Will are sat in his office and forcing themselves to dip the stale biscuits he’s offered them into mugs of stewed tea the same colour as the floorboards. “What on earth happened to you?”

“Oh he…um…got knocked over by a vegetable cart,” says Jack airily. Will gives him a look of disbelief. “Isn’t that right Mr Graham?”

Will, who’s extremely reluctant to identify as the kind of hapless asshole who routinely gets knocked over by carts of vegetables, is forced to grudgingly agree that this is indeed the case.

“Well it looks very painful,” replies the warden, joining the ranks of numerous other observers of genius who seem concerned that Will might not be aware of this and needs it pointing out. “Those drivers are as reckless as can be.” He gives Jack a soulful glance. “There ought to be some sort of law against it.”

“I’m fine,” says Will firmly. “And we’d be very grateful if we could continue with the interviews as soon as possible. We finished last time with…” he pauses and glances down at the list, “Mr Dolarhyde. Would it be possible to have him brought up?”

“I’m afraid you’re out of luck there.”

“Oh?” says Will sharply. “Out *again*, is he?”

“Yes, he’s taken some time off on compassionate grounds. I understand that his grandmother passed away – the poor lady had apparently been ill for some time.”

“When?”

“Three days ago,” replies the warden before adding, rather pointlessly: “Comes to us all in the end.”

“Close to her was he?” asks Jack. “At the risk of sounding callous the death of a grandparent isn’t the sort of thing for which compassionate leave would typically be granted. In the police force, for example, it’s a spouse or child only.”

“I really couldn’t tell you,” says the warden, whose tone implies he thinks Jack is indeed being callous. “But it was requested and granted, so we have to assume he was pretty cut up about it. Compassionate leave is unpaid after all.”

“What do you think?” asks Jack, drawing Will to one side and lowering his voice. “That coincides with the night of the murders. I suppose it’s safe to say that the man you saw wasn’t particularly grief-stricken.”

“We should still pursue it. We’ve only his word for it after all – and he did disappear the first time we tried to interview him. In fact the timing could be seen as a bit *too* convenient. As if he wanted an excuse to be away from the hospital once he knew the police were showing an interest.”

“To be fair Mr Graham it’s more likely just a coincidence,” says Jack, “although I agree; better safe than sorry. Do you have Mr Dolarhyde’s home address?” he adds, raising his voice again as he turns back to the warden.

“I’m afraid not. We don’t keep those kinds of records. There’s no need for them.”

“No need!” exclaims Jack. “Well where on earth do you send people’s salaries?”

“Our staff are paid in cash every week,” replies the warden stiffly. “In case it escapes you sir this is Whitechapel, not Westminster. We have neither the resources nor administrative support for banker’s cheques.”

“Quite right,” says Jack. “I apologise. But we *would* like to speak with Mr Dolarhyde as soon as possible.”

“Well you won’t have to wait all that long. He told Mr Jenkins he’d be back at work next week.”

“Then we’ll be back next week,” says Will in a firm voice.

*****

Just as with the death of Charlotte Tate the recent murders see a flurry of renewed activity before the trail grows slowly cold and everyone is forced to concede that the Ripper, once again, has exercised his uncanny ability to vanish away into the night. The frustration of it elicits various displays of weariness and disappointment at Scotland Yard yet Will remains undeterred; and in the aftermath of the latest outrage he hurls himself into the investigation with all the grim fatalism of someone hurling themselves from a cliff. He spends exhausted hours at the office, squints over witness statements by candlelight until his eyes sting, argues

with the coroner, debates points with Price (although not with Dr Chilton, who in the last few days has been strangely absent) and helps Jack field queries from the press in the morning then accusations from politicians in the afternoon. The mantra throughout remains the same and undercuts the motivation – *we have to catch him* – and he repeats it to himself over and over again to muster enough energy to look at just one more report, to refute just one more journalist, and to summon the momentum to visit the coroner's offices just one final time.

Nevertheless while Will's professional endeavours remain unaltered he still feels as if a change is coming over him. Or perhaps not a change; not so much as that. More like…an acceleration. A hastening of the pre-existing metamorphosis in which his entire sense of himself and what matters to him undergoes another subtle shift. As usual the focus of it is Hannibal and Will finds himself increasingly driven to spend every possible moment with him when he's not at Scotland Yard, scavenging for one interaction after another like a prospector sifting for pieces of gold. They're like trophies, these moments; something sought after and precious – something *earned* – and it takes only a brief bit of introspection to realise that such a visceral skirmish with death has reinforced a powerful need to embrace life and everything ardently passionate that it has to offer. Hannibal, attuned as always, responds with enthusiasm and Will decides that they are rapidly becoming incapable of keeping their hands off each other. Yet it's more than just gratification because at times he feels as if Hannibal's presence is becoming as necessary to him as breathing, with a fervency in each encounter that's enough to light the mind and smote the heart. He wants to breathe Hannibal in, to possess him, assimilate him; a metaphor of custody and co-option. *Devour. Consume*.

In this respect, and for as long as he can remember, Will has been instructed with the notion that sex is something sinful yet sacred (another dichotomy in other words) which occurs between a man and a woman for the begetting of children and absolutely nothing else. He now feels deeply naïve to have never understood that so many expressions and varieties of sex could exist, each of which invites a different presentation of the participants – as if it's an idiom all of its own, a language of the body. There's the languid tender kind in which Hannibal gazes into Will's eyes and calls him *beloved* then strokes his face and tangles their fingers together, telling Will how beautiful he is, how desired, how much he wants Will to enjoy it; how good he wants to make him feel. This kind is softly lit by candles or warmed in the winter sun and is guided by worshipful, questing touches that seek to read a story in each other's skin the way a blind person reads braille. It's quiet and yearning in the morning or sweetly peaceful in the evening and always begins with soft kisses then ends with murmured pledges of how the other is adored and valued – how they are *essential* – before falling asleep entwined in each other's arms. Then there's the turbulent type that's fiercely riotous and passionate: where nails are scraped against shoulders and teeth dug into delicate skin, and that's furious and exhilarating and feels as much like opponents in a fight as it does a pair of lovers and where neither is ever prepared to submit first. This is a type that's saturated with bruising tenderness and vicious intimacy, where Will twists Hannibal's arms to keep him still and tugs his head back by the hair and Hannibal pins Will down by the wrists before gripping his throat until Will gasps with pain; the type that scorches and scalds and is what love would be like if it was set on fire. Once Will fights too vigorously and leaves an accidental bruise on Hannibal's face that instils great guilt when he realises he's done it but which Hannibal wears with pride and makes no attempt to conceal. It lingers there afterwards for several days, highlighting a single sharp cheekbone like a duelling scar or other badge of honour, and it's impossible not to notice the way that Hannibal sensuously traces his fingers across it –

sometimes idly, sometimes with clear deliberation – before the dark eyes swivel towards Will.

And then there's another type entirely that pushes boundaries and dismantles inhibitions that Will didn't know he had – that he didn't know *anybody* had – and which seems to belong more within the pages of illegal French novels then it can possibly belong in the heart of staid suburban London. Most notably is an occasion when Will is lying blissful and sated in a sweaty tangle of sheets and Hannibal leans over and murmurs, soft and persuasive: "I would like you to do something for me *mylimasis*."

Will yawns and grumbles something unintelligible in response so Hannibal smiles and kisses his forehead, then retrieves a wooden box from beneath the bed before tugging a protesting Will upright until he's resting against Hannibal's chest. "Open it," says Hannibal in the same soft voice. He places the box on Will's knee then slowly trails his palms down Will's arms until their fingers are wrapped together and he can manipulate his hands across the lid.

"I'm tired," says Will, in a tone that's half annoyed and half amused. "Later."

"Now," replies Hannibal caressingly.

Will wants to refuse, but in spite of himself his curiosity has got the better of him – which he supposes Hannibal was counting on – so sighs loudly before allowing himself to be delicately puppeteered into opening the box. Upon which: "Ohhh," breathes Will with something a little like shock. "You *didn't*. How did you…? *Where*?"

"Where did I acquire it? It is not so difficult if one knows where to look, although it would admittedly be far easier on the continent than here. In Paris, for example, it is not all that uncommon for young men to receive them as gifts from their lovers." He brushes his lips against Will's temple. "In this respect I notice you ask *how* and *where* but do not enquire as to *what*."

"I know what it is," says Will faintly, even though the statement is based solely on conjecture rather than practical knowledge because it would actually be pretty impossible to conceive of such an item existing if it weren't right here in front of him. Almost trance-like he allows Hannibal to manoeuvre his fingers across the shiny leather of the…what? What the fuck would you even *call* it? This inconceivable phallic looking thing?...so he can feel how smooth it is and how it flares out at the base before tapering into a slender shaft that rounds into a curve at the very top. Neither the length nor width are especially intimidating, but the idea of allowing this…*thing* to be pushed into his body. To feel it inside him. It's surreal and bizarre – vaguely unsettling – and, fucking shit, it's surely *beyond* illegal. He can feel himself blinking rather idiotically and for want of anything better to say eventually repeats "I know what it is" in a firmer tone that he hopes sounds more worldly and sophisticated than he actually feels.

"Excellent," replies Hannibal, beginning to kiss the back of Will's neck. "Economical too, as further conversation about it is no longer required." Then, when Will doesn't make any kind of response: "And in which case you must also know that I need to move you into a better position before we can appreciate its full advantages."

“You’re not serious?” says Will with squirming, aroused embarrassment. “No. No, I *can’t.*” Although even as he’s protesting he’s madly aware of how he’s starting to arch himself against Hannibal’s chest, adoring and tactile like a cat rubbing against its owner; and which shouldn’t even make sense, considering that Hannibal *doesn't* own him and Will has never let himself belong to anybody.

“Dearest Will – of course you can,” replies Hannibal serenely. “Besides, it would give me an enormous amount of pleasure; and you like to please me don’t you? I know you’re tired my love but get up for a moment. Let me see you.”

And Will wants to refuse (and knows that he *ought* to) but nowhere near as much as he yearns to agree (and feels like he *needs* to). So without further persuasion he abandons his lingering unhappy inhibitions about the rightness or wrongness of it – or whether it’s immoral, or illegal, or even whether it’s vaguely depraved…because who *cares*? – and obediently hitches onto his knees with his face resting against his forearm so Hannibal can spread his legs apart and kiss his way down his spine. “That’s it,” murmurs Hannibal soothingly as Will’s breath begins to speed up. “Good boy. You’ll enjoy it, I promise.” He runs his tongue along the curve of Will’s hipbone then leans back on his heels and spends a few delicious moments massaging his hole, admiring how small and tight and beautiful it looks beneath his fingers before working one inside, then two, sighing with pleasure at how luscious and smooth Will feels and the way the muscle is starting to clench as if trying to draw him in. Will, in turn, gives a low moan and rocks his hips against the slowly stabbing fingers: partly because he likes the way it feels, but also because he’s realised that Hannibal is pushing his come as deep as possible back inside Will’s body and the idea of it is driving him slightly wild. Then he cries out as Hannibal twists his fingers round and the stroking and pressing becomes more insistent because oh God, it’s good – it feels so good – he could probably come just from this. Just from two of Hannibal’s fingers inside him, it would probably be enough…a bit longer and it’s going to be enough.

“Beautiful,” murmurs Hannibal reverently. “So beautiful Will.”

Will groans instead of answering, trying to ground and steady himself by focusing on the way Hannibal’s other hand feels pressing on his back: how deft the touch is, the slight calluses on his thumb and index finger, how firm and warm his skin is against Will’s. Then he groans again as Hannibal reaches into the wooden box and Hannibal makes another soothing sound and reaches up to stroke Will’s face and brush his thumb against his lips. As it is, Will’s so relaxed from his recent orgasm that with the help of some oil the leather plug – so obscenely invasive and outrageous and, oh God, *so* good – glides in with virtually no resistance at all, but Hannibal still inserts it unbearably slowly as if determined to savour every quiver and breathy gasp that Will can possibly make; then even when it’s fully inside keeps Will in place to admire the sight of it, crooning extravagant words of praise while stroking his fingers over the stretched slick skin around the base. Will’s whole body goes rigid at the sensation and he can hear himself gasping out “Oh Hannibal, oh, oh *fuck*” in a desperate sort of chant that’s interspersed with something perilously close to whining – but which doesn’t feel humiliating as opposed to admirably honest and unrestrained – as his eyes widen at how feverishly intense it is; trembling and gulping in desperate gasps of air as Hannibal runs a soothing palm up and down the ridge of his spine. And although it’s barely been half an hour since the last time Will can already feel himself frantic with desire all over again; how hot and heavy his

cock feels between his spread legs – the way the blood is pulsing there – and how he's starting to leak all over the sheets as his body clenches and tightens, already quivering on the verge of orgasm. Instinctively he moves his legs even wider apart and Hannibal tugs him upright then holds him against his chest, nuzzling Will's jaw and showering his face and hair with rapturous kisses while murmuring "Do you like that my darling? Does it feel good? Do you enjoy having it inside you?"

Will supposes that if there's a single moment in his life when he ought to be blushing then it's this goddamn moment right here; and yet it's not, and he isn't. If anything he's probably rather pale from something like shock – shock that he's not only allowed someone to do this to him but has actively encouraged and enjoyed it. Is *loving* it, in fact: is grinding his whole body against Hannibal's, gasping so hard it almost hurts and repeatedly moaning "Oh God, *yeah,* I like it, I really like it" in an ecstatically shameless way. Although the main thing he's really aware of is *whiteness*: spectral white noise filling his head, white hot heat in his body, white light sparking in front of his eyes; and when Hannibal reaches down and presses against the base of the plug Will tips his head back and practically screams. Then he roughly tugs himself free and spins round to crush their lips together in an urgent painful way before dropping to his knees like a supplicant so he can slide his tongue along Hannibal's cock, lavishly sucking and lapping at the head before boldly attempting to take the whole length into his mouth – fully aware that he's contributing much more enthusiasm than skill but unable to feel concerned or self-conscious about it. His eyes are beginning to water and Hannibal smooths the tears away with his thumb then pinches Will's nostrils together to make his throat open up, mingling soft approving noises with murmured encouragement and the occasional instruction before stroking Will's jaw so he can feel the way it's moving round his cock. Will, in turn, is dizzily aware of the way that Hannibal is gazing down at him like someone transfixed; and when he gives a low sigh and squeezes Will's shoulder as a warning that now's the time to pull away if he wants to, Will not only remains where he is but moves his head even faster, eagerly letting Hannibal come straight down his throat then staying on his knees to lick him clean while Hannibal croons ecstatic praise and strokes his damp hair off his forehead. Afterwards Will looks flushed and almost manic with wildly glittering eyes and Hannibal holds him down on the bed so he can make himself come from grinding his hips against the mattress; leaning over him and pressing the base of the plug in an exquisitely tantalising rhythm that's guided almost entirely by his own craving need to watch Will lose control of his body.

"I'm not going to remove it," says Hannibal as Will is trembling from the aftershocks and lying soft and pliant beneath his hands. "Nor allow you to either my love. I want you to go to work like this. I want you to spend all day feeling it and thinking of me – every single step you take; every time you move. I want everyone to run their eyes over you and admire your body and beautiful face, all the while oblivious to what you've been doing and to whom you *really* belong."

"Oh God, you're so twisted," replies Will straight into the pillow, although it's clear from his tone of voice that he's going to agree.

"Return home as soon as you can Inspector," adds Hannibal, slowly skimming a finger up and down Will's back. "My last patient leaves at six o'clock, at which point I expect to come upstairs and find you waiting on the bed. I shall ensure the fire is lit beforehand, so I want

you to remove your clothes and make yourself comfortable. On your back, I think, with those long legs spread open – make yourself look beautiful for me. And I advise you to get some rest in the interim because once I arrive I shall not be showing you any mercy at all."

With some effort Will hauls himself onto his back then hooks his ankles behind Hannibal's waist so he can tug him down on top of him. "Perhaps," he says, nipping against Hannibal's ear with his teeth. "*Perhaps* I might."

"My beautiful shameless boy," replies Hannibal languorously. He catches hold of Will's wrists and pins them above his head before beginning to suck a slow bruise onto his throat; just below the collar line where it might be noticed. "You know perfectly well that you are going to."

Will grins up at the ceiling where Hannibal can't see, yet ultimately does exactly as requested – consequently walking with a rather strained gait and spending all morning with a high colour on both cheekbones that causes everyone to assume he's coming down with another fever. Nevertheless he can't *quite* believe what he's done and the sheer, breathtaking audacity of it is so intoxicating that by midday he can't stand it anymore and furtively steals away in the lunch hour to go back to Harley Street. Once he's there he gets a bit of a kick out of sitting in the corridor in his coat and scarf pretending to be just another patient before the consulting room door finally opens and Mr Froideveaux – of all people – comes waddling out.

"Next week at the usual time," says Hannibal and then, without missing a beat: "Oh, good afternoon Inspector Graham. You are rather early."

"I know," says Will. "Something, um…came up."

Hannibal gives the very faintest flicker of a smile, but merely replies "Is that so?" in the same deadpan voice.

"Oh it's *you*," pipes up Mr Froideveaux, already starting to bristle with envious disapproval. "No appointment I see? You really ought to be a bit more respectful of Dr Lecter's time young man." Hannibal's blank stare promptly swivels in Mr Froideveaux's direction, who shuffles awkwardly and clears his throat before adding in a more polite tone: "He maintains a very busy schedule."

"Could you manage to fit me in Dr Lecter?" asks Will in an innocent voice.

Hannibal pretends to think about it for the benefit of the assembled patients in the corridor then says "I'm sure it would be possible," followed by one of his more inscrutable smirks. Then he holds the door open and Will ducks underneath his arm and pounces on him the minute it's closed again: scraping his teeth against Hannibal's throat and scrabbling at his jacket, wildly overcome with the urge to dismantle the smooth exterior as Hannibal unfastens Will's belt and rips his shirt open so roughly there's a clattering sound as some of the buttons hit the floor. Then for a few seconds they rock against each other, frantically searching out one another's mouths while Will listens to the sounds he's making: the panting, desperate noises, the way he's gasping out Hannibal's name over and over again, half-maddened with desire. And Hannibal, for once, seems completely unable to gain control of himself either as he pulls Will even tighter against him, stroking his hair so roughly his head snaps back before

making a sound that's almost a snarl and sweeping a pile of books off his desk so he can push Will over it, possessively gripping the back of his neck with his right hand. The long fingers feel firm and dextrous curled round Will's throat and he's acutely aware of how Hannibal could crush it right now without any effort at all. Then he draws in a ragged breath. Breathes out. Tries to focus and finds he can't, because – oh God – everything's so intense. *They're* so intense. They're all-consuming, and it doesn't even matter anymore because he wants them to consume each other…and he wants to watch it happen. Wind it up and watch it go. He pushes his hips back, biting his lip to try and hide the inadvertent whining noises he's making, and Hannibal finally releases his throat and glides his palm downwards so he can rub slow circles against Will's abdomen which is already embarrassingly slick and sticky from where he's leaking pre-come over himself.

"How wonderfully dissolute you are becoming," says Hannibal, practically purring with satisfaction. He reaches round again and roughly jerks Will head up so he can slide his wet fingers between his lips then leans away to take a few moments to admire the sight of his boy's sweet little hole stretched so prettily around the glistening leather; the skin slightly flushed and tender looking from so much friction. Neatly spitting onto his thumb, he begins to stoke around the rim before giving the plug a sharp twist and Will makes a small mewling noise and arches his back. "Shhh," soothes Hannibal. "Be still. What is it you want *mylimasis*?" Leaning over he presses his mouth against Will's shoulder with a pressure that's almost but not quite painful before giving a tender lick of apology across the graze his teeth have made. "Do you want the real thing? Is that what you came here for?"

Will groans in response but this time has no reservations in begging for it because it doesn't feel submissive or belittling but empowering – to demand what he needs without shame, restraint or reservation. There's nothing on hand to use for lubrication so Hannibal spreads his legs further apart and proceeds to eat him out instead, using his fingers to spread him open until Will feels he's basically being fucked with Hannibal's tongue and has been reduced to such a quivering, gasping wreck that he can barely walk straight and has to be half-pulled, half-carried across the room so that Hannibal can fuck him up against the ladder, clamping his hand over Will's mouth to stop him making any noise. Will's eyes flutter closed as he writhes within the lethally strong grip, barely able to move yet not really needing to because Hannibal's doing all the work for both of them. Then he bites Hannibal's fingers and tips his head onto his shoulder, moaning helplessly as his body tightens around Hannibal's cock and he envisages the line of patients in their prim little bonnets and pompous bowler hats, respectable and oblivious and just a few feet away on the other side of the wall. As if aware of the same image Hannibal speeds up, slamming his hips in a relentlessly punishing rhythm while whispering uncharacteristically obscene observations about the way Will looks, the sounds he's making, how much he wants it – needs it – the way he loves being fucked so hard, so wanton and shameless he'll walk halfway across London just to have someone pound their cock into his needy little body. Will makes a growling noise in agreement then bites down even harder on Hannibal's fingers, Hannibal's voice literally coiling into his head – as if he's so filled by it that he can't contain it all, can't think, can't be, because nothing else exists in the entire world except the two of them – and he can feel himself starting to lose it completely. He's aware of the noises he's making, breathy and broken and desperate, begging Hannibal to fuck him harder (*please, please, please*), and almost sobbing at how good it feels as they hit a perfect rhythm and he frantically tries to chase a release that feels just seconds away.

Hannibal's breath against Will's throat is now so warm it's like a brand and the sensation of it all is phenomenal, as if every nerve is alight: nothing hurts, everything hurts; it's the best thing, it's the worst thing; he's blessed and cursed and damned and exalted and he's not even sure he needs to touch himself because Hannibal's mere *presence* is going to be enough to make him come. It's like scouring a piece of wood, burnishing and sanding off one another's splintered edges each time they touch as Will's fingers scrabble helplessly against the ladder, limbs quivering so badly it's becoming difficult to hold himself up until Hannibal has to hook an arm round his torso to stop him pitching over. His skin's so slick with sweat Hannibal's palm glides over it and when he digs his teeth against the back of Will's neck Will can feel his whole body begin to tremble and tighten, the sensation more than enough to start tipping him over the edge. So Hannibal bites him even harder, nearly enough to break the skin, then uncurls his arm from round Will's waist and begins to fist at his cock to match the rhythm of his hips: and Will cries out as he immediately starts to come, drenching Hannibal's hand in a series of hot thick pulses that's so intense his legs give way and he has to cling onto the ladder to stay upright. Hannibal follows soon after, gasping against Will's skin then yanking his head back by the hair to kiss him with incredible care and thoroughness – brutal-hard, then tender-gentle – before finally letting him go; and Will staggers away and leans against the wall with his face resting on his arm: sated, sore, struggling to draw breath, limping very slightly and with a dapple of finger-shaped bruises already emerging on both hips; all of which Hannibal immediately notices and feels faintly remorseful over, although not nearly enough to regret causing them in the first place.

Afterwards, as they're straightening their clothes and smirking at each other, Will can't help appreciating why Hannibal values etiquette and boundaries so much – because *how* it heightens the pleasure of demolishing them. It's really time for him to head back to Scotland Yard but in order to delay a little longer he moves up behind Hannibal and wraps his arms round him: kissing the back of his neck then stroking his hair as a silent indication of how much he'll be missed in the next few hours – how Will misses him already, even before he's left. Hannibal murmurs Will's name and reaches round to touch his face and Will remembers, rather hazily, Hannibal's previous insistence about there being greater ways to consummate a relationship beyond actual sex. Such a concept seems impossible now, because when they're here like this – just the two of them, just like this – even his imagination can't summon anything beyond it. Because what more could there be; what else *could* two people do together that's any more momentous? Hannibal finally turns round, the dark eyes skimming over Will's face like flares; and Will promptly forgets about everything else in favour of gazing yearningly back as they inhale each other's breath – grounded and steadied in a way he doesn't always know how to be as he slowly drowns in all the nameless intimations written in that relentless soulless stare.

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A few days later Hannibal is due to visit Cambridge to deliver a lecture at the medical school and Will, who is dreading his departure but embarrassed to admit it, vetoes suggestions of spending the final evening at a theatre or restaurant and persuades Hannibal to stay at home and loll around in front of the fire together instead.

"Are you sure?" asks Hannibal, who doesn't entirely know how to loll and has begun to look wistfully in the direction of *The London Review*. "*Don Giovanni* is on at the Royal Opera

House. Or a play if you prefer? There is a new production from J.M. Barrie which has received very good notices."

"Isn't that the *Peter Pan* guy?" says Will, who's flicking through the newspaper and trying to find a story that doesn't contain any reference to the Ripper investigation. "I used to like that when I was small."

"You still are small my dearest."

"You're nowhere near as funny as you think you are, you know. You *do* know that don't you? Your self-delusion is rather tragic. Anyway I did; I liked the character." He pauses and smiles rather wryly. "*'The cleverness of me*.'"

"You are being sardonic, I suppose, although considering how intelligent you are I don't see that the comparison is inappropriate."

Will makes an absent-minded humming noise in response, then spots a grainy photograph of Jack with one of himself underneath and hurriedly flips over the page to avoid it.

"Somehow I see you as more aligned with the Lost Boys," adds Hannibal in a thoughtful tone.

Will rolls his eyes but doesn't reply, instead stretching out a foot and prodding Hannibal's leg in silent indication that this is not a welcome conversational topic. Hannibal smiles then catches hold of the foot and begins to stroke along the arch, enjoying the way Will's toes flex in response to the pressure. "The cleverness of you," he repeats. "You certainly have the namesakes for it: Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Blake, to name but three." Will grunts noncommittally then gives the newspaper a self-conscious rustle. "*Is* your given name William, by the way? Or are you really a Will?"

"No, I'm really a William. Are you a Hannibal or a Hanibalas?"

"I could be either. The latter is the correct form in Lithuanian – just as you would be Guillaume if you were in France."

"I wouldn't mind that actually. It sounds quite dashing, like Guillaume Dubois."

"Indeed. Or the last person to successfully invade the British Isles: Guillaume le Conquérant."

"Oh yes," says Will, briefly looking pleased.

"One might even venture into a botanical strain," adds Hannibal in an exaggeratedly sincere tone. "*Dianthus barbatus*: Sweet William."

"That was *appalling*," says Will without looking up from the newspaper. "You should count yourself lucky I don't turn round and vomit over you."

"It was appalling – you are quite right. Interesting though; I remember thinking of you in those terms when I first saw your photograph in the newspaper. 'A rare plant.'" He pauses for

a few seconds, silently reconstructing the scene. “I believe I likened you to a rose in the end. *Rosacea*. Beautiful and innocuous to a casual eye yet with a clear capacity to wound. And you see I was proved entirely correct.”

Will doesn’t reply straight away but then abruptly drops the newspaper and moves along the sofa so he can curl up next to Hannibal and rest his head on his knee. “I don’t want you to go,” he says quietly.

“I know you don’t, but I must.” Will makes a slightly dejected noise. “You could always come with me?”

“I can’t leave London at the moment. Mr Crawford wouldn’t allow it.”

“True. At any rate I shall be back in two days. It’s not long to wait.” Hannibal puts down his own book and begins to run his fingers through Will’s hair. “Why are you so anxious? It is rather out of character. Besides, think of all the fun you are going to have dismantling my gramophone while I’m gone.”

“Not anxious – clingy,” says Will gloomily. “Why don’t you just say clingy? It’s what I’m being.”

“Even if you were – which I dispute by the way – there wouldn’t be any shame in it. No matter what you like to believe to the contrary you are not infallible. You are allowed to express a desire for company and reassurance, just like anyone else.” Will doesn’t reply but buries his face further against Hannibal’s leg. “I suppose that sense of foreboding has returned?”

“Yeah…something like that.”

“It’s hardly surprising Will, given everything that’s happened. And if it makes you feel any better I am feeling incredibly clingy myself at the idea of you being away from me. Rest assured I shall be pining in my hotel room every night – I shall no doubt make myself both ridiculous and deeply pitiful.”

Will gives a huff of laughter then pulls himself upright and reaches over to where his jacket is slung across the back of the sofa. “I got something for you,” he says, beginning to root about in the pocket. “I’d like you to have it before you leave.” His voice sounds calm enough, although in fact the gesture is an impulse of the moment because he collected the regard ring several days ago and has been carrying it around like a guilty secret ever since, unable to fully commit to handing it over. It’s not that he regrets the sentiment behind the gift, but when viewed with a purely pragmatic lens he suspects it was a ridiculous thing to have done and is going to be met with politely restrained embarrassment. In fact it’s probably going to be excruciating. ‘How very charming,’ Hannibal is going to say, turning it over in his fingers and attempting to sound sincere. ‘I am much obliged to you.’ And then there’s going to be an awkward silence, and Will is going to have to pretend it was meant as a kind of joke in order to save face…although that won’t work either, because no one as poor as Will would spend so much money on a joke so it’ll be *obvious* it was in earnest. Oh God why didn’t he just stow it away in Hannibal’s suitcase with an accompanying note, destined to be discovered in private with miles and miles to separate Will’s extravagant show of emotion from its deeply

discomforting consequences? Why didn't he just do that? He should have done that. It would have been *far* more sensible …

"And do you intend to show me?" says Hannibal with a faint smile, "or shall I be required to guess?"

Will realises he's just been sat there for several seconds plucking at the corner of the box without making any move to relinquish it. He now stares at the embossed name of the jeweller, imprinted across the velvet lid with simple professional pride, and can't help thinking that even *this* is in bad taste – at least compared to similar boxes he's seen in Hannibal's possession, which are always of glossy sweet-smelling wood or intricately worked metal, and have clearly wafted in from the premises of some peerless antique shop or exclusive Bond Street jeweller. Swallowing slightly to quell the surge of nerves he silently passes it across.

Hannibal's smile flickers on again as he leans forward to receive the box before curling back against the sofa to open it and inspect the contents – Will watching anxiously the entire time at the way his eyes dart across the row of tiny stones to interpret the message in the acrostic. Then for a few seconds he goes completely still before glancing up with an expression that Will can't quite remember seeing before and is uncertain how to decipher. It's something about the set of his mouth and the way he's gazing straight ahead, very fervid yet oddly removed, as if he's not entirely present. His eyes are so intense they almost look like they're glittering. "Oh Will," he says softly.

"I know you can't wear it," blurts out Will, who by this point has grown actively apologetic from the suspicion that such passionately messy devotion is going to be surplus to requirement in Hannibal's impeccably well-ordered life. "I mean it's quite small, it probably won't fit...but, you see, I couldn't make it obvious that it was meant for a man. And I know it's not your style – I mean, I know it's not *at all* – and to be honest I'd probably rather you didn't wear it because someone might notice." Will finally runs out of breath. "But…but I wanted you to have it all the same."

"Will," repeats Hannibal in the same soft voice. "*Mylimasis*. How could you imagine that I would not adore this?" He pulls Will forward and presses his lips against his forehead, then rather than let him go again holds him even tighter and gently moves his cheek against Will's hair. "The only thing I shall ever be persuaded to value more is you yourself."

"Oh," says Will, somewhat nonplussed with pleased relief. "Oh, okay then. That's good."

"The cleverness of you," repeats Hannibal softly. "You know, when I first saw you I thought you were something wild and untamed that I had to try and conquer. I was wrong wasn't I? Rather you are something to run wild with."

"Excuse me?" says Will, rather muffled from where his face his pressing against Hannibal's shoulder. "Did I just hear you admit that you were wrong about something?"

"You did indeed. I was wrong about you in several ways, although not – I hope – in others." Hannibal pulls away slightly then cups Will's face in both hands, smoothing his thumbs beneath his eyes as if trying to stroke away the shadows there. "It's strange Will," he says

after a pause. “You constantly overpower me but I can’t bring myself to resent you for it. Yet while the first time I discovered something I could faithfully yearn for was the day I discovered you, my need to possess you is fraught with inconsistency. At various times and in various ways it’s been contrary to comprehension, to judgement, to expectation, to peace of mind or freedom of choice, to hopefulness, happiness, or contentment; contrary even to my own sense of myself.” As Will gazes back silently, somewhat overwhelmed by this speech, Hannibal tightens his grip then leans further forward until his eyes are boring straight into Will’s; ardent and hypnotic like burning flints. “I have never been drawn to someone so fiercely as I am to you,” adds Hannibal softly, “yet while parts of me resist it and try to maintain an independence, there is no doubt that the loss of you is unimaginable and I would rather be haunted by your image and driven mad by the memory of you than to not have you at all. I am both murderer and martyr to my own devotion. You – my love of a lifetime, for a lifetime, and for whatever lives come after. Never try and leave me Will.”

There’s something about his tone which strikes Will as faintly ominous although it’s hard to say exactly why. It’s the gravity of it perhaps…the *severity* – as if something mortal is at stake – and for a few seconds Will is reminded of the preacher in his hometown, intoning away from the Old Testament while he squirmed next to his father in the pew: ‘*For the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you…*’ Not, of course, that it’s really possible to imagine Hannibal ever trying to hurt him. Not deliberately…not *seriously*. Even when they’re being rough with each other there’s still a sense of him constantly holding back, as if Will’s presence compels him to repress a layer of ferocity that’s lying just below the surface. It’s not like Will is the one with the bruised face after all.

“Why would I do that?” is all he finally says.

“You might decide you have your reasons.”

“No,” replies Will firmly. “I wouldn’t – *couldn’t*. There’s nothing would make me.”

There’s a pause and then: “Nothing,” repeats Hannibal in the same rhythmic voice. “Nothing is merely the absence of *something*. It doesn’t negate that the thing still exists. We shall have to see won’t we? Tell me Will, have you ever lost someone you loved?”

Will rolls his eyes then presses his fingers against Hannibal’s mouth. “Stop it,” he says. “You were doing so well before. Don’t ruin it.”

Hannibal smiles very faintly then shifts his mouth free so he can kiss Will’s palm. “Forgive me. I’m unsettling you aren’t I? I sometimes forget that you are younger than I am and how different our experiences have been. You in your little homespun corner of America and I in my European wilderness…the losses are always going to vary in degree, as well as in kind.”

“Anyway I haven’t really lost anyone. My mother, I guess, although I never knew her. Perhaps it doesn't count.”

“It counts,” says Hannibal. “But to *lose* someone as opposed to see them taken from you. To have them torn away, whether by circumstances or by design...” For a few seconds there’s a note of something like sadness in his voice, then as quickly as it was there it’s gone again and

he leans forward and places another kiss on Will's hand. "Nevertheless, your objection is noted; consider this the last word on the topic. Although perhaps one day you may have cause to remind me of this conversation and tonight's vows shall have to be renewed for a second time."

"*Vows*," says Will with a slight laugh. "There you go again: always so melodramatic. You're making it sound as if we're married."

"Pledges then, if you prefer; although I don't think vows is all that unsuitable. Consider, after all, what one of your namesakes once had cause to observe: '*Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments/Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds/Or bends with the remover to remove/O no, it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken*.'" He pauses and the thoughtful look briefly returns. "How resolute are we really, I wonder? How fixed?"

"We're fixed," replies Will, and he says it firmly with no sense of doubt or reservation because the truth of it is undeniable. Fixed in place, bound irrevocably – whether they like it or not. It doesn't even feel like a choice anymore: it just is. *Because for the rest of our lives*, thinks Will with a flash of certainty, *no matter how long we look and how far we search, there'll be no appreciation for me like yours and no acceptance for you like mine*. Because they're two striving hearts and two singular minds – a unique alliance – equal in energy, equivalent in compulsion, identical in their strength of purpose; and because Hannibal, for all his boldness and brilliance is just as alone as Will is – and they're both alone without each other.

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The morning of Hannibal's departure Will staggers downstairs at dawn to see him off then stands shivering on the doorstep with a blanket round his shoulders to forlornly watch the carriage until it vanishes into the fog. He feels too edgy and restless to properly concentrate on work but still attempts it regardless and spends most of the day in the consulting room poring over the coroner's reports and twitching with irritation at the constant sense that he's missing something. In the evening a telegram arrives from Hannibal – '*Arrived safely. Miss you. Shall return as soon as possible*' – and Will turns it over in his fingers for a few wistful moments before crumpling it into his pocket and gazing despondently into the fireplace. Then he goes upstairs and tugs on one of Hannibal's shirts before curling up on his side of the bed (despite feeling like the saddest bastard alive while doing so, because for all Hannibal's insistence on his own state of pining it's safe to say that he's not going to be mooning about in his hotel room wearing any of Will's clothes). The faint trace of Hannibal's cologne across the pillowcase is reassuring, yet the night is still an unsettled one that's choked and writhing with darkly threatening dreams which leave Will trembling and gasping for breath before reaching out across the bed for a comfort that's not currently there.

The next day Will lets himself sleep in late then gets dressed mid-afternoon and sneaks off to Marylebone Road to forage for food because the idea of perching with stiff-backed formality on one of the expensive dining room chairs while being fed by servants is completely appalling. There he finds the high street far quieter than usual, no doubt owing to the vicious weather which is colder than ever with drifts of dirty grey snow and a tempest of wind that

sends the horses rearing up in alarm from their harnesses. “Meteorologists predict worst storm on record!” calls the newsboy, triumphantly brandishing a copy of *The London Times* as if daring the wind to try and snatch it away. “Read all about it! Opinions from The Royal Society inside!” Will gets a copy out of habit, not because he’s particularly interested in either the weather or The Royal Society’s crappy opinions thereon, but because it’s something of a relief to see the Ripper investigation finally pushed off the front page. Then he buys a sandwich from a vendor at the Baker Street junction and a bottle of ginger ale from the grocer’s next door and carries the whole lot off to the pavilion in Regent’s Park to consume it in silent solitude whilst brooding over the general lack of progress in the hunt for the Ripper. Sure enough there’s a self-righteous screed on the second page of the newspaper about the incompetence of Scotland Yard in general, and the Ripper squad in particular, and Will irritably tosses it to the floor before getting to his feet and beginning to pace in fretful circles. The previous mental itch has returned with full force, not least because the suspicion of the last few days is burning brighter than ever and he’s convinced beyond doubt that there’s something he’s missing; several things in fact. Will frowns again, mulling this over. To say something’s ‘missing’ isn’t entirely correct, because it’s not the facts themselves he’s overlooked – scorched into his memory like a brand from hours of constant review – but rather the way they fit together.

It’s only five o’clock but already the sun is starting to set and from the window of the pavilion Will can see what looks like a beggar shuffling towards the boathouse, clearly seeking refuge from the torrents of swirling snow. He’s clutching a cane in his right hand, and while he doesn’t appear to be blind the sight of him stirs something in Will’s memory that rankles in an indefinable way. There have been several of these moments in the past few weeks: only slight impressions, inconsequential in themselves, and yet which somehow manage to snag and catch on the edges of his consciousness like that eerie child tugging on his coat in the middle of Whitechapel. *Notice me*, these moments say; each and every one. *Notice me, notice me*.

“Come on, you stupid bastard,” says Will out loud. “I thought you were supposed to be clever?” Rather sardonically he reflects on Hannibal’s words the other night; the rollcall of elevated intellects. ‘*You certainly have the namesakes for it: Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Blake, to name but three*.’ “Come *on*,” he repeats, more urgently this time. “*Think*.”

The constant pacing isn’t helping anymore so Will draws to a halt then takes a few deep breaths and closes his eyes, trying to focus as a kaleidoscope of images weave and spin. At times it feels precarious and he has to constantly remind himself to take a few steps back in order to keep them on one side while he himself remains safely on the other: observing, intuiting and sensing, yet never merging with them *too* closely. It’s a *danse macabre,* just Will and this other unknown mindset that slices sharply from one side to another and cleaves the air with whispers of insight. A violent choreograph of perception, like watching a pendulum swing. He’s no longer sure of how much time has passed as he remains in rigid position, chiselling and carving at the impressions to see what might emerge because, oh God, it’s there…it’s *right there*. It’s always been there. Then he frowns again, shifting through the various shards and shreds as overhead the first claps of thunder begin to thrash across the sky and abruptly – painfully – his eyes snap open. “Jesus,” says Will softly. “William Blake.”

And finally, one by one…the pieces fall into place.

A blind woman's cane in the National Gallery.

Her shadowy companion, his features blurred away.

The silent watcher in Whitechapel: "A cap pulled all the way down, like he only had half a face."

A collection of art postcards on the wall of a mortuary.

And in the darkly desperate depths of an alleyway…the wrath of a Great Red Dragon.

*****

"Dolarhyde," Will is practically yelling at Jack. "Francis Dolarhyde. It's him – he's the Ripper. I'm *certain* of it."

"Slow down Mr Graham," says Jack, although not in an unkind way. "Run it by me again."

"The man in the alley mentioned the coming of 'The Dragon,'" says Will through gritted teeth. "The conversation I had with Brown in the National Gallery was virtually right in front of Blake's Great Red Dragon painting. Which was right in front of a man with his cap pulled down over his face. Which was the same man Mr Zeller saw in Whitechapel. *Which is the same man who's twice avoided an interview with us and is currently working at the Whitechapel mortuary with a bunch of William Blake postcards over his desk*." Will takes a deep breath, struggling to bring his temper under control. "Everything fits the profile sir, *everything*. A dominant maternal figure – the grandmother. The non-threatening female companion – the young blind woman."

"All right," says Jack soothingly. "All right Mr Graham."

"Please don't patronise me sir. Remember what you said yourself about circumstantial evidence? At the very least we need to speak with him *right now* and see if he can alibi himself for the nights of the murders."

Jack draws in a long breath then lets it out again, clearly not entirely convinced but likewise not inclined to dismiss it outright either. "We'll go back to the hospital first thing tomorrow," he eventually says.

"Tomorrow!"

"But what can we do this evening? The only people there will be the patients and a couple of night nurses. Even if the warden *was* there he'd be of limited help – you heard him say yourself that they don't keep a record of addresses."

"One of Dolarhyde's colleagues might know."

"Maybe, but they're not going to be there right now to ask." Will sighs fretfully and Jack gives him a sympathetic look. "Look son, if it *is* him at least we know he's not going to harm

anyone tonight. The murders have always been at least several weeks apart and he's only just committed two."

"With respect sir, we can't *possibly* be certain that he's not going to harm anyone else."

"But what else can we do right now?" asks Jack reasonably.

Will sighs again, aware that this is indeed the case yet consumed with an almost unbearable sense of thwarted frustration. "I can see you're sceptical sir," he adds after a pause. "And I know some aspects of it might seem a bit outlandish. But trust me on this. I wouldn't say it if I wasn't sure. I just…I can *feel* it. It's him."

"We'll check," replies Jack. "First thing tomorrow. I promise – no stone unturned."

Will sighs defeatedly, highly dissatisfied with this solution even as he's aware there's no better one available. "We have to go straight away sir, as soon as possible. I'll meet you here at seven o'clock."

"Better make it eight. The warden won't be at his desk until at least half past nine."

"Eight o'clock then. No later."

"Eight o'clock it is." Jack nods briskly as if to seal the deal then begins collecting a stack of typewritten papers on his desk. "Well, there's nothing more to be done now Mr Graham, and I'm afraid I'd better get back to work. There's been a series of robberies in Bond Street – this weather seems to bring out the worse in everyone."

"Yeah," says Will, who's not really listening.

"Go home son, no need for you to work late as well. Save your energy for tomorrow."

Will nods half-heartedly and begins to gather up his coat and scarf. "I hope you're not stuck here too long," he adds, trying to show a bit of polite interest.

"At this rate I might just sleep in the office," replies Jack, gesturing towards the sofa. "It's blowing a gale out there and if it gets much colder the roads will freeze."

Will grimaces then is forced to step to one side as Inspector Turner comes bustling in to add another sheaf of papers to the already burgeoning pile on Jack's desk. "Tomorrow then," he says.

"Tomorrow," confirms Jack. "Now get yourself home Mr Graham, don't wait any longer. Remember the warnings – there's a storm coming."

*****

Will returns to Harley Street with a sense of miserable foreboding that not only refuses to fade away but rapidly ratchets up to a greater pitch as the evening wears on and he's forced to traipse home on foot owing to the cab drivers not wanting to risk their horses' legs on the icy roads. By the time he finally gets back he's ready to ignite from restless pent-up tension and

spends about 20 minutes pacing in front of the fireplace in an attempt to coax his chaotic thoughts into calmness while reminding himself that there's nothing practical to be done until tomorrow. In a grasp at productivity he eventually decides to take up Hannibal's invitation to use the medical library and after a bit of browsing selects Erichsen's *The Science and Art of Surgery* for research purposes, as well as *Fasciculus Medicinae* and *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* for their historical novelty, then bears the whole lot off to the chair in front of the fire before being disturbed by a frantic pounding at the front door. In fact such is its loudness and urgency that Will's first panicked thought is that something must have happened to Hannibal (*overturned carriage, a fire at the hotel*) and he drops his book and runs towards the door so fast that he reaches it before Mary is even halfway down the stairs. The resultant gust of wind is vicious enough to blow out all the candles in the hallway and Will peers out anxiously into the murky blackness where he's both surprised and relieved to see none other than Zeller, swathed up against the storm in a thick black coat and hopping from one foot to the other with restless excitement.

"Mr Graham!" he blurts out before Will's even had a chance to invite him inside. "You're *never* going to believe it. They've got him!"

"The Ripper?" For the first time in the last few weeks Will's pale face begins to fully relax and he seizes Zeller's shoulders, hauling him forward in his eagerness to hear the rest. Zeller, grateful to be out of the storm, cheerfully obliges before propping himself against the wall of the hallway, his damp skin shining rather eerily in the moonlight.

"It's all exploded in the last hour – Mr Crawford's still at the Yard trying to sort things out. He was going to send a messenger but I thought you should hear about it in person. It's all down to you after all."

"No – not just me." Will drags his hand through his hair, still struggling to process the enormity of the news and aware he should get some matches to replenish the candles yet reluctant to postpone the conversation for even the few minutes it would take to find them. "It was a team effort. I mean the fact you spotted him in Whitechapel for starters."

Zeller hesitates then frowns. "Well it's nice of you to say so, but no; I never saw him. It was Matthews. Turner as well, I believe."

Will's head jerks upright at this, the sense of foreboding immediately crashing over him again with full force. "What do you mean?" he says sharply.

"I'm not sure," replies Zeller, whose good-natured face has begun to acquire a confused expression. "What do *you* mean?"

"Are you telling me…" Will takes a deep breath. "Are you telling me they *haven't* arrested the suspect known as 'Jack the Ripper'?"

Zeller's face immediately clears. "No Mr Graham, you were right all along about there being two – and now we've got the first one! You were right about him being a medical doctor as well; you were right about *everything*. They're already calling him the Camden Ripper. Not destined to be as notorious as Jack perhaps, even if he was the original version."

Will sags slightly against the doorframe. “Jesus. Well who was it?”

“That’s the most shocking part. Honestly Mr Graham, we were all...”

“*Who*?”

“Dr Chilton!” says Zeller triumphantly.

For a few seconds Will can’t respond at all and is only aware of frantically shaking his head from side to side. “*No*,” he finally manages to say. “No, there’s been some sort of terrible mistake.”

“They searched his house Mr Graham, just like you suggested.”

“No, but I didn’t seriously…”

“There was incriminating items *everywhere,”* confirms Zeller before Will can protest any further. “One of the murder weapons, personal effects from some of the victims – I mean, he had a signet ring belonging to the director of the Royal Opera House stashed in a box underneath his *bed*.”

Will glances up sharply for a second time as his memory gives an abrupt twinge at Zeller’s words. *Some time ago now: a florid man with a braying voice and expressive hands, bearing down on Will and Hannibal in a marbled foyer. ‘I have to say, dear boy, that you are exuberantly pretty...’* There’s a pause and he realises that Zeller is staring at him. “I didn’t even know he’d been murdered,” he says slowly.

“It was while you were away from the Yard. Not long after Chilton tried to have you committed.”

“When I was sick.” Will hesitates then clears his throat. “What does Dr Chilton say?”

“Oh he’s denying it of course,” replies Zeller, flicking his hand dismissively. “He claims everything was planted. I mean obviously he *would* say that, although he naturally hasn’t got any kind of explanation as to why someone would be motivated to stash crime scene evidence all over his house. And why *would* they? Why would the real Ripper even know who Chilton is, let alone want to frame him?”

“I don’t know,” replies Will in a strained voice. “I don’t know why. But there’s *no way* Dr Chilton is responsible for those murders.”

“Mr Crawford thought you’d say that. He told me to tell you not to worry about it and that they have a strong case – just turns out Dr Chilton was a lot more cunning than any of us realised. And *infinitely* more disturbed. Everyone’s really pleased with you Mr Graham; they want to try and get you some kind of police medal. Mr Crawford said that they’d never have realised there was a second murderer without your input …” He falters then trails off. “You don’t seem very happy about it.”

“I’m not,” snaps Will. “It’s a major miscarriage of justice. And while I don’t particularly care about Dr Chilton for every hour he’s in custody there’s an *extraordinarily* dangerous person

walking round free."

Zeller nods owlishly at this, then claps Will on the shoulder in a forbearing way that's obviously kindly meant yet makes Will want to scream. "Talk to Mr Crawford tomorrow," he says. "He'll put your mind at rest better than I can. Anyway, I'll leave you to the rest of your evening. I just wanted to let you know."

"Of course, yes, thank you," says Will, trying to sound sincere before adding "do you want to stay for a drink or anything?" in an attempt to be appreciatively sociable while secretly praying Zeller will refuse.

"No thanks; decent of you to ask but I better be heading home before the weather gets any worse. Although at least I *can* get home. Charing Cross will be completely inaccessible; Mr Crawford and the others are likely to be stuck at the Yard all night. Not that they'll be short of things to do to pass the time, the paperwork alone is going to be astronomical. Plus Dr Chilton's housekeeper turned up just before I left; *completely* hysterical, poor lady. She's convinced he's innocent."

"She probably should have thought of that before," says Will irritably. "She hardly helped his case when she spoke to Mr Crawford about her 'concerns.'"

"I know, but she claims it was because she thought Chilton was ill."

Flashes of his original impressions during the dinner party abruptly veer into Will's memory and he can't help adding "Or drugged." Zeller looks confused and Will shakes his head: *never mind*.

"Yeah, she thought he was ill," continues Zeller after a slightly awkward pause. "Not that… Well. Not to put too fine a point on it, that he was a cannibalistic serial murderer. She's adamant that if he were really guilty she would have known."

Will winces. "Hardly surprising. It's not just her affection for him, it's what it shows her about herself. She wouldn't want to even *acknowledge* the possibility she'd been so deceived in his character."

"I felt badly for her," agrees Zeller beginning to tighten his scarf. "But you know what they say: there's none so blind as those who don't want to see."

*****

After Zeller has left Will reverts to the same miserable version of himself prior to the visit: relentlessly fretful pacing like an animal in a cage, interspersed with periods of enforced calmness in front of the fire with the medical books before flinging them to one side and beginning to pace again. From the next room he can hear the parlour maid engaged in emptying out the fireplace – *scrape scrape scrape* – and the sound grates on his raw, frayed nerves to an extent that's almost excruciating. Longing for the silence and solitude of an empty house, he abruptly decides to find Mary and request that all the servants take the evening off. Tossing aside the book once more he runs down the winding stone steps to the kitchen two at a time only to have to retreat back up again on discovering that Mary's not

there. She doesn't seem to be on the first floor either and he's just beginning to contemplate getting irritated when he comes back downstairs and sees her emerging from the consulting room.

"Oh there you are sir!" she says. "I've been searching everywhere for you."

Will yearns to snap '*Likewise*,' but on seeing her earnest kindly face can't bring himself to do it. "I was looking for you too," he replies, deliberately softening his tone.

"Sir?"

"You can take the evening off Mary. Tell the others would you?"

"Well, that's very good of you sir. But won't you mind being on your own?"

"It's fine," says Will, wanting to add that he'd prefer it but concerned it might seem rude. "I've got some work to do – quite a lot to be honest. In fact you can take tomorrow as well."

"Well if you're quite sure Mr Graham," says Mary. "Thank you very much; it's a nice treat for everyone."

"Great," says Will, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"But I've a message for you before I go sir – a visitor has just arrived."

"It's not really convenient Mary. Did you tell them that Dr Lecter's away?"

"I did, yes sir. But as it happens it's you they came to see."

Will runs a tired hand over his face. "For me? Is he from Scotland Yard?"

"It's a she, sir. A lady."

"A lady?" repeats Will, nonplussed. "Mrs Bloom?"

"No sir, this lady is a friend of Dr Lecter's; a very great friend. It was a pleasure to see her again, I don't mind saying so – I had no idea she was back in London. Miss Du Maurier her name is. Miss Bedelia Du Maurier. Would you like me to show her in?"

Chapter End Notes

Serious Historical Notes

The real-life Jack the Ripper really did strike twice in one night in the manner described here, often referred to by historians as 'The Double Event.'

Another historical balls-up in this chapter (surprise!) as Peter Pan apparently came out in the early 1900s. Goddammit, I was convinced that sucker was Victorian.

Silly Shippy Notes

I was fortunate enough to have a native speaker do the translations on my first fic and can therefore tell you with complete sincerity and a mostly straight face that 'Hanibalas' is the correct form of the name in Lithuanian (and when used to address someone it's 'Hanibalai'). Which as I'm sure you'll agree is just…amazing #Hannigramilas

Not that I insist on having the last word or anything (even though I clearly do) but many thanks to the lovely Nalyra for letting me know that after all that shrieking in the comment section, post-RDC it looks like this fic is canon-compliant after all. Meh heh heh. Oh sorry, what's that you're saying there Hugh?

ETA October 2017
Thanks to the wonderful tictactoes this chapter now has some stunning fanart, available to feast your eyes on here All the hugs and thanks to her for being so generous with her time and talent :-)

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Hey Victorian Fannibals! The wonderful Cherry did a very adorable sketch to accompany Chapter 19 so if you like you can go over to Twitter and put your lovely eyes all over it. I have to say that this has now officially become one of my favourite scenes of the fic on the grounds that it was the basis for 1) this drawing of Victorian Waltzing Hannigram and 2) The Sad Orphan Bullshit Face.

Will is badly tempted to say no (as in no way…as in: *hell* no) but can't quite bring himself to do it; partly because Mary is clearly bursting to go and fetch Bedelia but mostly because Hannibal might hear about it and be displeased – what with her being such a *very great friend* and all – to know that she turned up in the middle of the worst storm on record and was effectively told to fuck off back into it by Will. "Yes of course," he says now, trying hard not to sound too grudging, "I'll be along in a moment." Then, as an added concession: "It'll be nice to meet her." And perhaps it might (it won't). Although at least, he reasons to himself, a visitor will provide some desperately needed distraction against the evening's darkly unsettling turn. Surely anything's better than pacing and brooding after all; in fact in this respect the timing might actually prove to be quite fortunate.

"Very good sir," replies Mary happily before bustling off Bedelia-wards, and Will sighs to himself then sprints upstairs to grab his jacket and attempt to do something with his hair which is currently sticking out in improbably mad tufts from where he's been running his fingers through it. In truth the urge to perform such finicky activities is rather aggravating because he scorns other people's opinions about his appearance as a general rule; but there's no doubt that Miss Bedelia Du Maurier (being a *very great friend*) is going to be the sort of person who's elaborately refined and fragrantly elegant and he wants to make a good impression. Or at least, amends Will (catching sight of his pale face with its lavish veneer of multi-coloured bruises and conceding that a good impression is almost certainly stretching the bounds of probability) a minimally bad one. Then he returns downstairs and immediately realises that he forgot to ask exactly *where* Mary was intending to show Bedelia – and is busy tormenting himself with a humiliating image of sheepishly poking his head round assorted doors until he finally locates them – when he's saved by the sound of female voices coming from the parlour. Will sighs to himself all over again, even louder than before, then fights an irresistible impulse to run off back upstairs before forcibly pulling himself together and approaching the heavy oak door – feeling gauche and nervous the entire time and overcome with a ridiculous urge to knock.

Bedelia is nestled on the sofa in the manner of royalty holding court when Will walks in: gracefully poised, impeccably coiffured, resplendent in black lace and purple silk and with Mary curtseying around her in a sort of frenzy. Both of them immediately glance up and fall silent when he sidles round the door and Will, in turn, realises that he'd managed to convince

himself that Bedelia would be a respectably solid matronly type and is therefore surprised (and not entirely pleased) to see that she's not only barely older than him but also strikingly attractive with a high smooth forehead and coils of glossy blonde hair. Nevertheless there's something about her complacent haughtiness that he instinctively finds deeply irritating and it takes a huge amount of self-control not to begin defiantly slouching and sticking his hands in his pockets.

"And here he is," says Bedelia before Mary has a chance to formally introduce him. "Hannibal has described you so exactly I should have known you anywhere." She neatly tucks her feet a little further beneath the sofa and darts Will a distinctly triumphant look; and Will has an immediate sense of being put at a disadvantage – no doubt exactly as intended – because while Hannibal has obviously told Bedelia a considerable amount about him he knows absolutely nothing about her in return. Bedelia's coral-coloured mouth flickers into the very faintest hint of a smirk, and Will catches it straightaway and in revenge decides that from now on his personal explanation for this state of affairs is going to be that while Hannibal is enormously interested in waxing lyrical about Will to anyone who'll listen he couldn't give a shit about doing the same for Bedelia (and intends to stick with this explanation, thank you very much, regardless of whether or not it's actually the case).

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he says in his best social voice.

"Oh, likewise," replies Bedelia with an elegant little wave of the hand.

"I must tell you madam," interjects Mary, "how *very* happy I am to see you. And looking so well too! What a treat it is to have a familiar face around the house again."

Bedelia's complacent smile reappears and Will has an immediate albeit rather ludicrous sense of being aggrieved by this, as if Mary is being a traitor in some way. 'Oh come on Mary,' he wants to say, 'it's hardly like I'm unfamiliar – let's face it, you've overheard me having highly illegal sex.' And it's not as if she's ever seen Bedelia naked and delirious. (Or *has* she? He takes another covert glance at Bedelia's extensive elegance and promptly decides: no. Absolutely not). So in the end he just gives a chipper little nod, as if earnestly agreeing with Mary's sentiment about the extreme charm of familiar faces, then folds himself into one of the plushly upholstered chairs and knots his fingers together.

Bedelia graciously inclines her head towards Mary before turning her back on Will and reaching into her bag (slinky purple silk to match the dress) to retrieve a swathe of beautifully delicate fabric printed all over with clusters of tiny apple blossoms. "I brought you this from Paris Mary," she says. "I thought you could have it made up into a dress. The colour will look very well on you."

"Oh *madam*," breathes Mary, clutching it to her chest with both hands as if it's a new born baby. "How good you are! I've never seen anything so lovely in all my life. I shall wear it to church and be quite the finest person there. My poor friends will be terribly envious."

"Yes, I dare say. I brought some for Nettie and Louisa too. Are they still with you?"

"I'm afraid Louisa left us last month," replies Mary, wondrously tracing her fingers along the shimmery edge of the cloth. "She got married madam. She was always a pleasant courteous

girl and Dr Lecter was very sorry to see her go. Although he bought her the loveliest dinner service as a wedding present; Louisa was thrilled."

"Ah, yes, that is a shame. Although see what an exotic addition you have to the household with Mr Graham here. You must take your consolation where you can Mary."

Will immediately resents the phrase 'exotic addition to the household,' rather as if he's some kind of rare pet (*mongoosemongoosemongoose*) not to mention the fact that his arrival has pointedly just been used to console for the loss of a servant. Bedelia, he decides, is clearly a master of carefully controlled venom: delicate barbs that find their mark with lethal precision yet are so subtle and cleverly contrived that it's impossible to call her out on it. Mary, cheerfully oblivious to any possible tension, now demonstrates Bedelia's proficiency of the undetectable insult by turning to beam at Will (as if having his existence sanctioned by Bedelia has reminded her that he's still in the room) before trotting over to show him the fabric – and which Will, who couldn't really give less of a shit, has to feign polite and extensive admiration over for Mary's sake. It's actually rather exhausting. "Of course you're quite right madam," adds Mary with a kindly look at Will. "There has certainly been a lot of interest in the neighbourhood. What with Mr Graham being an American gentleman."

Bedelia now turns her head – elegant and graceful as a swan on her slim white neck – and directs a coolly appraising stare in Will's direction, rather as if she's expecting him to launch into the *Star Spangled Banner* for her express amusement. "I can imagine," she says with another faint smile.

"Oh yes madam. Dr Kendler invited a French colleague to stay one time and Dr Grant had the Italian gentleman. Dr Macuzzi – you may remember him madam? You were at the dinner party Dr Lecter held when he was a guest."

"Oh yes. He was rather scrupulous in his tastes wasn't he? I remember him pestering Hannibal about the precise ingredients of the *bourguignon*. Do you recall Mary? Hannibal merely gave one of those inscrutable stares of his and said 'I would tell you, but then you would be afraid to try it.'" She turns now to Will, blue eyes calmly impassive. "All the doctors in this district *do* so love to entertain one another."

"A lot of continental visitors madam, certainly," adds Mary with another fond glance at Will. "But it's hardly the same."

"No indeed. I suppose European acquaintances are rather *passé* compared to the colonies."

"*Former* colonies," says Will cheerfully. "I'm afraid we threw you out."

"Of yes, of course," replies Bedelia in a languid voice. "*Former* colonies. Nevertheless the point still stands – trust Hannibal to go one better than the neighbours." She darts Will another little look from beneath her thick eyelashes as if to imply that Hannibal might just as well have rifled through the London Zoological Gardens and acquired something similarly foreign and outlandish. "I don't suppose many of them have ever met a real live American before."

"Oh no madam," agrees Mary. "Certainly not."

“And already getting into fights I see,” adds Bedelia, gesturing towards her own flawless face. The tone of this is distinctly condescending – rather as is she’s admonishing the grubby offspring of some social inferior who’s just been hauled up for scrapping in the middle of the street – and Will shifts irritably in his chair as her smile broadens slightly before turning back to Mary and adding: “Of course men can’t help themselves can they?” The two of them then proceed to share an indulgent feminine chuckle over men’s haplessness in general – and propensity to punch each other in the face in particular – and Will has an overpowering urge to snap: ‘*Yeah, it was a only a little thing. No big deal. Just some small-time local criminal… you might even have heard of him. JACK THE FUCKING RIPPER*.’

“Can I bring you anything?” Mary is now asking, ostensibly to both of them even though she’s still gazing lovingly at Bedelia. “Refreshments of any kind?”

“Tea would be perfect, thank you,” replies Bedelia, which means that Will (who is desperate for a proper drink but feels like he can’t decently sit there knocking back whiskey while Bedelia is taking delicately fastidious sips from a tiny china cup) has to reluctantly ask for tea as well. Mary curtseys several times in succession then leaves the room, still clutching the fabric as if it’s the Holy Grail, at which point Bedelia’s eyes swivel back to Will again.

“So you’re the one,” she says thoughtfully. “Forgive me the curiosity, but I simply had to see you in person.” Will raises his eyebrows expectantly although she fails to elaborate further in favour of running her eyes over his face, coolly contemplative and with absolutely no indication of whether or not he corresponds with what she was expecting. Like Hannibal she very rarely blinks, but instead of the Sphinx-like smile hers is more in the strain of the Mona Lisa; and Will has a sudden surreal image of them gazing across a table at one another – Bedelia feline and haughty, Hannibal carefully controlled and ominous – as they silently compete over who can be the most serenely inscrutable. He clears his throat, trying not to let his impatience show, and Bedelia obligingly turns her head again and asks: “How did you two meet?”

Will hesitates for a few seconds at this as he tries to formulate a response. Partly because he’s convinced she already knows and isn’t certain what her motivation is in asking but also because he isn’t immediately aware of what to say. It’s an odd sensation; such an incredibly simple question and yet an answer doesn’t come naturally because it somehow feels as if they’ve *always* known each other and it’s hard to refine their relationship in terms of real-world chronology. “I consulted with him on the Ripper investigation,” he eventually replies, to which Bedelia’s eyebrows begin to elevate up her forehead. “We needed medical input.”

“Indeed?” murmurs Bedelia in a softly insinuating voice. “Might I ask which one?”

Will’s eyes immediately narrow and he goes completely still. “What do you mean ‘which one’?” he asks sharply, just as Bedelia leans back against the sofa and neatly refolds her hands across her lap.

“Which murder?” she says after a tiny pause.

Will bites his lip at this tranquil response then silently reproves himself for being ridiculous and paranoid enough to assume Bedelia knew of there being more than one Ripper. *Naturally*

she was referring to the victims…how could it possibly have been otherwise? “Yes,” he replies, relaxing slightly. “From the Tate case onwards.”

Bedelia nods and then appears to be examining her fingernails in some detail before abruptly raising her head and casting another gimlet-eyed glance toward Will’s chair. “He was helpful I suppose?”

“Extremely,” says Will, who’s already bored of doing his refined social voice and has let the American accent come flowing back at full decibels. “Some of his insights were quite remarkable.”

Bedelia begins to smile again before smoothly re-adjusting her expression into its previous porcelain-perfect mask as the door opens and Mary comes bustling in with a silver serving tray. “Ah – oolong,” she says appreciatively as the tea pours out in a fragrant gold stream. “How delightful.”

“I know Dr Lecter would want you to have the best madam. Any for you sir?”

Will, who’s struggling against a rather childish urge to start cackling at the sound of Bedelia’s highly cultivated voice pronouncing ‘oolong’ in such a pointlessly reverent way, abruptly straightens his face and says yes he will, thank you very much.

“And when does Hannibal return from Cambridge?” asks Bedelia. She takes a delicate sip from her cup then basks down again contentedly on the sofa rather like, thinks Will, the cat that got the canary. Every canary…*all* the canaries. “When I last spoke to him he seemed unsure of how long it would take.”

“Tomorrow morning,” replies Will. Considering the telegram he’s actually hoping it might be earlier – possibly even tonight – although is reluctant to admit this in case Bedelia takes it as encouragement to prolong her visit. “Hopefully the weather won’t disrupt the journey too much.”

“I’m rather surprised he attempted it at all.”

“He didn’t particularly want to,” protests Will, defensive at anything that might appear to cast aspersions on Hannibal’s judgement. “He would rather have stayed.” He pauses for a few seconds, remembering Hannibal’s expression on the morning of his departure: the air of enigmatic melancholy and the way he cupped Will’s face with his hand, the thumb caressing Will’s cheekbone over and over again like someone touching Rosary beads. “But a lot of people were coming to hear him. He thought it would be rude to cancel.”

“Yes, his expertise is always highly sought after. As long as I’ve known him he’s always been in demand.”

Bedelia, Will decides, has the most extraordinary voice. The cadence of it is so unnatural: rhythmically beautiful yet lilting and pulsing in a distinctly unsettling way, like an eerie lullaby intended for nightmares. “I suppose you know him very well?” he adds now, somewhat cautiously. Not that an answer is really required, because even as he’s speaking fragments of previous conversations have abruptly coalesced in his mind and he’s

increasingly convinced that Bedelia Du Maurier, the blonde opera companion, and the dance partner in Paris are undoubtedly one and the same.

Bedelia takes another sip of her tea, seemingly waiting for Mary to tiptoe out with the tray before replacing her cup in its saucer and fixing Will with a long, languorous stare. “I do,” she finally replies. “I know him very…intimately.”

“Right,” says Will. Then he calmly stretches his legs out in front of him and entertains a brief yet endearing fantasy of strolling across the rug and announcing ‘Actually, you smug bastard, I’ve known him very intimately all over this room, including the sofa. Yeah, that’s right – you’re probably sat on the results of the intimacy as we speak. Now shut up and drink your fucking tea.’ Instead he gives a deliberately vacant smile and adds: “Do you?”

“Yes. I do.”

“That’s *nice*,” says Will with exaggerated politeness. Bedelia gazes back defiantly and Will can’t help wondering what Hannibal would do right now if he was aware that the pair of them, to all intents and purposes, are currently engaged in a battle over who has the greatest claim to him. Because despite the delicate little parries and courteously controlled verbal thrusts a fight is exactly what it is. It’s hard to imagine him being vainly gratified over it in the way many people would be but embarrassment or awkwardness feels equally improbable. Most likely he’d be coolly fascinated, slowly glancing from one of them to the other.

“It’s the reason I’m here now,” adds Bedelia as if to compound this point. “My *knowledge* of him. Hannibal is someone who spends a huge amount of time building walls around himself; it was impossible not to want to meet the person who was clever enough to begin climbing over them.” Despite the apparent compliment Bedelia’s voice doesn’t contain even the faintest flicker of warmth and she waits again, persistently patient and biding her time, before leaning forward and fixing Will with another penetrating stare. “His response to you has been rather striking Mr Graham – but of course you must already know that.”

Will takes a sip of his own tea then looks her straight in the eye, frank and unafraid and refusing to concede even the smallest piece of ground. “Yes,” he replies after a deliberately loaded pause. “I know.”

“I’ll be honest Mr Graham; I told him that he was obsessed with you.” Will raises his eyebrows. “He said he was *intrigued*. I told him yes – obsessively.”

“So what else did you tell him?” asks Will in the same calm voice, immediately detecting that some kind of denouement is looming on the conversational horizon and determined to deny her the satisfaction of springing it.

Bedelia obviously feels the same because her eyes promptly narrow: *touché*. “You wish to know what I told him? Very well. I warned him that you were going to be his biggest mistake.”

“I’m sure he appreciated your concern,” says Will evenly. “Hannibal clearly needs guidance, after all.”

For the first time Bedelia's rigid finesse shows signs of cracking and Will detects a clear flash of anger in her voice as she replies: "More than you know. There's a veil, Mr Graham, that separates us from one another and ourselves. I've been with him behind the veil. You? You've always been on the other side."

Will raises his eyebrows again and then carefully replaces his cup in its saucer. "You think so, do you?" he says lightly. "What makes you so sure?"

Bedelia doesn't answer immediately and when she finally speaks she sounds as if she's choosing her words very precisely. "You know Mr Graham, I passed through Billingsgate yesterday. They were selling birds – small songbirds in cages, poor things, condemned to be some rich girl's novelty toy. Hannibal is a little like that. He puts us all in cages to see what we'll do: whether we'll fly away or dash ourselves dead against the bars." Will glances up sharply and Bedelia leans even further forward. "You, on the other hand, are flying straight towards him. He's inspired such devotion in you hasn't he?"

Will strongly suspects that she's assuming he'll be embarrassed by this and deny it, so once again withholds the satisfaction and says "Yes," in a deliberately casual way before adding "mutually, as it happens"; not because he feels a defensive need to state it – or even because he's *entirely* certain that it's true – but because he's interested in what reaction it'll muster from Bedelia.

In fact Bedelia does nothing at first, merely continues to regard Will with her blankly wide-eyed stare, before eventually emitting a low sighing sound that's so soft and rustling it might have come from the luxurious folds of her dress. "Yes Mr Graham," she says; and there's an undertone of something in her voice that's difficult to fully interpret. "I suppose it is. He could daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you."

Will shifts slightly in his chair, reluctant to admit that he's been unsettled by the jarring intensity of this statement yet unsure how best to respond. For a few seconds there's nothing to break the silence except the hissing and crackling from the fireplace before Bedelia leans towards him once more, her pale face eerily illuminated by the writhing flames. "Yet you're so righteous and reckless aren't you?" she adds, her low voice softly suggestive. "You've also been traumatized, which makes you unpredictable."

"Which makes me a survivor," snaps Will. Fleetingly he thinks of the patina of scars all over his body, the way that Hannibal obsessively runs his fingers across them. Murmured words of reverence in a smoky voice: '*Luminous in all your damage.'* In this respect he feels very strongly that Bedelia is wrong because the breaks are the places that let the light in: blemished and broken and thriving in spite of it, because scars don't belong to the dead or the dying. The message of scars, whether mental and physical, is something else entirely. They say: *I survived and endured*. They say that the benefit of being shattered is how the slivers and fragments gather together again and become both refining and defining.

Bedelia dips her head as if reluctantly conceding the point before adding: "You were lonely when you first met him." It's phrased as a statement, not a question, and Will opens his mouth to refute it but she sweeps on regardless before he has a chance. "Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness. And what does vulnerability do? It makes us susceptible to those who wish to prey on it."

“Or responsive to those who want to lessen it,” says Will sharply.

Bedelia narrows her eyes again, clearly displeased by this contradiction. “Perhaps. Yet it depends so much on whom one encounters. Remember those birds Mr Graham? Those little birds in their cages? Imagine you were walking down the street and you saw one, wounded by the side of the road. What's your first thought?”

“It's vulnerable. I want to help it.”

“My first thought is also that it's vulnerable. And yet; I want to crush it. A primal rejection of weakness which is every bit as natural as the nurturing instinct. Of course, I wouldn't crush it; but my first thought is to do just that.”

Without entirely meaning to, Will can hear himself saying: “Extreme acts of cruelty require a high level of empathy.”

“Just so. And Hannibal, of course, understands that completely. One might almost say he’s made an art of it. You, on the other hand…violence is righteous to you. Because you are compassionate. You’re not a genuine predator, even if you’d like to be.”

The atmosphere in the room has undoubtedly changed now. It’s growing thick and heavy – curdling with menace – and the tone of the entire conversation has begun to stir something in Will: something dark and fathomless, carefully buried within his consciousness that he doesn’t want to acknowledge and the mere hint of which is making his heart pound faster. He can feel it now, throbbing in his ribcage like a piston that’s worked its way free and is spiralling out of control. Something buried, yet buried alive…writhing and screaming in a shallow grave. “Is there a point to all this Miss Du Maurier?” he says instead, his voice deliberately calm. “Because you interrupted me in the middle of something and I’d prefer to get back to it then sit here drinking tea and trading cryptic remarks.”

“Oh yes,” says Bedelia. “The tea.” She holds out her cup and examines it meditatively, admiring the fragile whorls of the handle and the exquisitely small brush stokes that decorate the fine china surface. “Mr Graham, have you ever seen Hannibal shatter a cup, just like this?” Will shakes his head with barely concealed impatience and Bedelia gives a brisk nod as if his incomprehension has merely served to confirm her suspicions. “I have. I asked him what he was doing. He replied: ‘*Occasionally, I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor on purpose. I am not satisfied when it doesn’t gather itself up again. Someday, perhaps, that cup will come together.’* Tell me Mr Graham, what do you think that means?”

Will can't help frowning at this: badly disturbed, in spite of himself, by the implications of Hannibal engaging in such a bleakly pointless gesture. “Loss,” he finally manages to say. “Destruction. And the irrevocability of both. That no matter what you might wish to the contrary, you can’t reassemble what’s been shattered or regain what’s been lost.”

“Yes,” says Bedelia, and it now feels as if her rhythmic voice is literally slithering inside Will’s head. “Hannibal has sustained great loss in his life. Many years ago now – long before you or I ever knew him – and which has influenced him in all manner of…interesting ways. You see Mr Graham, I agree with you about the inevitability of loss and damage, but what Hannibal would no doubt add is the indifference of the world to both. Call it *fate*, call it *God*;

it remains the ultimate cruelty of the universe that our wants and wishes are constantly disregarded. That what's been taken can never be restored to us." She pauses and her cold blue eyes flicker thoughtfully over Will's face. "Of course Hannibal still likes breaking things himself. He likes to see if he can recraft them in his own image."

"Not me," snaps Will. "He's never tried to make me do anything." His right hand, gripping the arm of the chair, is starting to ache with tension and he slowly forces himself to relax his hold – even as he's reassuring himself that he believes what he's saying, and even as he knows it's not entirely true.

"Of course he hasn't," replies Bedelia, almost tenderly. "What Hannibal does is not coercion; it's persuasion. Has he ever tried to persuade you to kill anybody Mr Graham?" Will flinches slightly and she sees it and gives the faintest hint of a nod. "He will. And it will be somebody you love. And you will think it's the only choice you have."

Will's temples are beginning to throb and he reaches up to remove his glasses only to realise he's already taken them off. "My presence here really bothers you, doesn't it Miss Du Maurier?" he finally says, horribly aware that the first waves of genuine panic are starting to scrabble at the back of his mind and fighting for every semblance of self-control not to let them show. "I wonder at you going to all this trouble. Is your influence over Hannibal really so precarious that you have to try and drive off any potential threats to it?" Bedelia stares back serenely, giving no indication of either confirming or denying this, and Will finally abandons all attempts at civility and adds: "Your surname is rather unusual. You're not a relation to George are you, by any chance? His latest novel has some themes that appear to be a family interest."

"Very good Mr Graham," replies Bedelia calmly. "Not particularly polite, of course, but very pithy. You intend to liken me to Svengali don't you; manipulator *extraordinaire*. I wonder…" Her lips curl into another slow smile. "If we're exchanging these picturesque analogies let me offer you one in return. Are you familiar with the legend of Bluebeard?"

"No. I suppose the fact I'm not particularly interested isn't going to stop you telling me?"

Bedelia refolds her hands on her lap and then fixes Will directly with her glacial stare before beginning to speak. "A wealthy nobleman brings his new bride to his castle," she says, and there's a clearly mocking inflection on the word *bride* that immediately makes Will bristle. "The youngest and loveliest of all his previous wives – incredibly resourceful in some ways, yet touchingly trusting and naïve in others. Eventually her husband is called away and leaves her with instructions that she can enter any room in the castle that she pleases except a forbidden underground chamber. Of course, curiosity being what it is, her desire to see the secret room gets the better of her. And what does she find?" She pauses again, her face eerily illuminated in the firelight as outside the window the wind continues to shriek and howl like something in pain. "The corpses of all Bluebeard's former wives," says Bedelia softly, "hung on hooks upon the wall." Will flinches again, more visibly this time, and her faint smile grows broader. "It's all an allegory of course. The dead wives can be read as one's secrets: the skeletons in the cupboard, as the saying goes. And the fatal consequences of curiosity. What's your perspective on curiosity, Mr Graham? How eager are you to know?"

“Eager enough,” says Will levelly. The panicky shadows in his mind are really starting to scream now and he blinks a few times before summoning an anguished level of effort to maintain his composure and get to his feet. “Well, it’s been a pleasure Miss Du Maurier but I really think you should be leaving. The weather’s getting worse all the time and you don’t want to find yourself stranded.” Not that such a thing seems likely; in contrast to Zeller or Jack, it’s somehow implausible to imagine that Bedelia is going to have even the slightest difficulty getting home – as if she’s entirely capable of bending the elements to her will and the flurries of snow are just going to slink off shame-faced.

“How considerate you are,” says Bedelia before standing up herself, lithe and supple as a sprig of lilac in her purple dress, and beginning to calmly gather up her belongings. “I shall bid you a good evening then Mr Graham. Perhaps we’ll meet again one day? Perhaps in very different circumstances…perhaps not. Who can tell? But do give my regards to Hannibal in the meantime.”

Will just holds the door open for her in grim silence without indicating whether he will or he won’t and Bedelia lingers in the hallway as she fastens her bonnet then adjusts her fox fur stole more snugly round her shoulders. Its poor dead face stares up at Will – sightless glass eyes above a gaping mouth and dangling paws that once would have run through the woodland wild and free – and there’s something about the pathos of it that he suddenly finds unbearable. Scrubbing a hand over his face he deliberately averts his gaze only to look up and promptly meet Bedelia’s eye instead.

“You know the story is so concerned with Bluebeard that we never really get to learn his wife’s perspective,” she says in a thoughtful tone. As Will stares numbly back she briefly falls silent, gloved fingers coaxing the door handle open as the wind and howling darkness, finally granted entry, begin to swirl their way into the corridor. “Being whisked away like that into such a strange new life. The isolation of it; her enforced dependency on a monster…and how she felt on entering that bloody chamber. We can imagine it I suppose. *I’ve* imagined it.” The blue eyes burn into Will’s like chips of ice as her voice, already so low and crooning, drops another register until it’s something resembling a pulse. “Who holds the devil, let them hold him well,” says Bedelia softly. “He will hardly be caught a second time.”

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Once he’s alone again Will drifts back into the drawing room like someone in a trance, aware that he’s regressed to the same mindless locomotion of the night in the alleyway (one foot after another, left to right) because the mechanical motions of movement are a last grasp at constancy as the world threatens to cave in. Then he closes the door behind him and hovers in front of the fireplace, absorbed and intense while he imagines he can see himself and Hannibal from the past few months – moving, touching, talking – grainy and indistinct like the afterimage from a photography plate as they shift around the room. He can see the way that Hannibal is able to intuit his moods and thoughts without having to be told about them and anticipate what Will needs before he even has to ask for it. He can see the way Hannibal’s eyes linger over him, how the sharply impassive face softens slightly when Will begins to speak and how Hannibal can not only keep up with Will but often exceed him, inciting Will to strive towards greater heights of acuity and reflection. He can see boldness and recklessness and intellectual daring and he can see moral ambiguity and an approach to

ethics that are fluid and paradoxical…but surely no more so than many free-thinkers who rebel against the stifling constraints of the age? No more so than Will himself. Two halves of a whole, then; that's what he can see. Complimentary symbols in the same equation, both problem *and* solution. One a volatile questing clutter of consequence and principles, the other with the coldly curious and impersonal topography of a lunar landscape; one who's overly empathic, one who's non-empathic, and both unique yet both so similar, like the same discordant strain of music pitched on a different unfathomable instrument. This then, surely, is the reality. It's what he can *see*. How could he possibly have been blind to so much else?

"*No*," says Will out loud. "No, you're wrong. It's not true."

But even though it's not true – and even though he's wrong – he still pours himself a desperate glass of brandy as his breath disfigures itself into quick jerky gasps before retrieving *Fasciculus Medicinae* from where he flung it down by the chair and forcing himself to turn the pages until he finds the illustration he knows is there waiting for him. It takes a while to relocate it, not least because his hands have started to quiver and it makes his movement clumsy and slow, yet he persists in a misery of methodical concentration as he repeats to himself, every time he flicks over a new page – every time with greater urgency – that he's wrong. The coroner's reports are still on the table in their starkly gruesome stack and he now has a crazed sensation that they're watching him and silently urging him on as he scans from one grisly engraving to the next until he finally finds what he's looking for: von Gersdorff's *Wound Man*, resplendent in all his hurt and horror yet still remaining upright in defiance of his injuries and holding out his arms as if preparing to step from the yellowing pages on mutilated feet and drag Will towards him. The sight of it nearly makes Will retch and he slams the book closed and hurls it away from him before crumpling against the wall because he's no longer certain if his legs can continue to hold him. Then he draws a few painful breaths and presses his burning forehead against the cooling glass of the mirror, pulling away after several seconds to examine the palely haunted face – dry-eyed, defiant and desperate – that's staring back at him. In some ways it looks the same as it ever has: still delicate-boned, still with the large eyes above the sensitive mouth; and yet he knows in that moment that the former youthful hope and confidence have gone forever. It reminds him of the photographs of soldiers returning from the Civil War: the blank numbness like a stretch of water thick with ice, the tortured shadows flickering behind their eyes. *Such things that I have seen*.

Will takes a few more laboured breaths, fighting an urge to cry out with helpless hopeless confusion because he's now so painfully aware of his ingrained need, having been confronted with a problem, to find Hannibal and confide in him about it. '*What is the matter Will?*' Hannibal would say when he saw the expression on Will's face; and Will would pace around and explain what was bothering him while Hannibal listened patiently without interrupting, a concentrated look on the angular face before delivering a thoughtful surmise that would immediately make everything feel clearer and calmer. Because isn't that what he's always done? All the times Will's felt frightened or angry or overwhelmed in the past few months and has gone to Hannibal for comfort and reassurance; all the times he's laid his head on his knee or curled up against him. How can the source of protection have become the main source of threat; how is it even *possible*? How can the paddle have broken? A love, a lover… the love of his life. Slowly and arduously he forces himself to pull away from the wall and turn round and the first thing in his line of sight is the ferocious yet oddly beautiful sculpture

of the Hellenic warrior which, just like the first time he encountered it, still appears as if it's preparing to devour the vanquished body of an adversary. Will's breath hitches into another sharp sawing gasp and for a few wretched seconds he screws his eyes shut as he recreates the scene: the way he'd translated the Latin inscription of the base and Hannibal's resulting flicker of surprise, almost as if he'd been caught off guard. *Mortifer: Oderint dum metuant*. Bearer of death: Let them loathe so long as they fear.

Stood there now, shipwrecked and stranded, Will remembers the protective barricade he constructed in his mind when interpreting Jack the Ripper. The way he'd defended himself from merging too closely: a slicing, swaying choreograph of perception with himself on one side of the pendulum and the Ripper on the other. Will's sense of self and the Other's sense of self: object and subject, distinct and separate. Only this time it's not like that because it's as if he and Hannibal have now merged so far he no longer has any clear sense of where one of them starts and the other ends, as if someone has cut the pendulum string. Blurred and blended together…just as Hannibal had always said about Will and the original Ripper: '*You don't see the world the same way he does, yet you can assume his point of view.*' And yet Hannibal isn't here anymore, it's just Will. It's Will with a meticulous row of tiny stitches in his forehead because Hannibal, contrary to common knowledge, originally trained as a surgeon. It's Will having just dismissed the servants, selected for their discretion one and all, because *'It is extremely convenient to have employees who will act in one's interests and only observe what you tell them to. There are several things which occur in this house that I have no desire to be broadcast.'* It's Will, having just heard that Dr Chilton has been framed as the original Ripper after showing every signs of being drugged…just as Will once did.

Will feels a sudden flare of pain in his right hand and glancing down he realises he's been gripping his glass so tightly it's shattered. A trickle of blood runs down between his fingers and he stares at it numbly; stares at the scarlet-splashed shards and slivers of crystal and the way they catch the candle light. They won't gather together again. But what does it matter anyway when there are far worse things to break? A promise; a pledge. A heart. The previous panicky horror has faded away now, almost as if it's too much for his mind and body to bear, and has been replaced by something calmer and heavier that's laying across his ribcage like a lethal caress and yet which in spite of everything is still seasoned with an insane determination to hope. Hope that he's wrong. Hope that none of this is what it appears to be. Because he wants to hope – he wants it so badly – even though he feels like he's tempting fate in doing so. Even though hope is avoidant and escapist and complacent. Even though it lies to you.

Will goes out into the hallway in the same trance-like stupor and nearly cannons straight into Mary who's fastening her bonnet in anticipation of her evening off. "Well I'll be leaving now sir," she says, "thank you again." Then she pauses and peers a little closer at him, her kind face crumpling with concern. "Are you all right Mr Graham? You've gone very pale."

"Just a slight headache Mary."

"Would you like me to stay sir? You really don't look very well."

"I'm fine, honestly," replies Will in an odd mechanical voice. "But before you go…would you happen to have the key to the cellar?"

“I’m sorry sir, but Dr Lecter has strict instructions that no one is to ever go down there. There are valuable artworks you see.” She catches sight of Will’s expression and makes a regretful noise. “It’s nothing personal Mr Graham, truly. I’ve never even been in myself. If it was up to me I’d happily give you the key but without Dr Lecter’s permission, well – it’s more than my job’s worth.”

Will just nods wearily as if this was what he was expecting. “I understand,” he says. “Please don’t worry about it.”

Mary gives a grateful smile in return then makes as if to go before faltering and turning back again so she can place a hand on his arm. “If I may sir,” she says earnestly, “I hope you’re not minding anything that Miss Du Maurier might have said to you? She’s a forthright lady at times but you mustn’t take her too seriously. It’s been so good for Dr Lecter having you here, we’ve all noticed it. You…you make him very happy sir.”

“Thank you,” says Will in the same flat voice.

“He’s had a lot of sadness in his life; a lot of loss. I think he needed someone to care about again. It’s not my place, I know sir, but I think having you here has really brought something out in him.” Will stares back mutely and she hesitates again then briefly replaces her hand on his arm. “You won’t leave him will you Mr Graham? At least not right away? You’re not going back to America?”

“No Mary. Not right away.”

“Well then.” She seems embarrassed now, clearly concerned that she may have said too much and gone beyond her station. “That’s good sir. Isn’t it? That’s very good.”

“Yes,” says Will. “Yes, it’s good.”

“What time would you like me back tomorrow?”

“I don’t know Mary…I’m not really sure if I’ll be here tomorrow. Better wait until you hear from Dr Lecter.”

“I’ll do that sir. Goodnight then.” She darts him a rather anxious look and Will gives a strained unhappy smile in response then waits until the door has closed behind her before sprinting down to the kitchen where he retrieves a long tapered skewer from the roasting dish by the range. It’s not ideal dimensions to pick a lock being overly long and broad but he’s too overwrought to expend the time and energy locating anything more suitable and runs back upstairs with it regardless so he can crouch in the hallway, lantern in one hand and skewer in the other, and proceed to coax the heavy padlock into releasing its grip. At first it’s stubbornly resistant to each attempt but Will perseveres – fuelled, more than anything else, by this last desperate chance to prove himself wrong – and after several minutes of agonised probing the padlock finally snaps free as Will takes a deep breath and pushes back the door.

He’s expecting it to shriek on its ancient hinges but in fact it glides opens with silent insinuation, rather as if it’s inviting him in; and this itself makes his hope die a little faster because why go to such trouble to keep a lock well-oiled if it’s barely used? The darkness on

the other side is so thick and heavy Will feels like he could cut it with shears – feels like he could choke on it – and he takes anxious care in winding his way down the twisting stone stairs for fear of losing his step and plummeting to the bottom with shattered limbs and a broken neck. The shadows from his lantern flicker crazily against the walls and there are several times he thinks he's seen movement only to spin round and be confronted with his own crookedly lurching silhouette. The deep red brick of the walls add a horribly vivid hue to the whole environment: warmly scarlet and slavering, like being inside a giant mouth, and the acoustics are so echoing and disembodied amid all the brick and stone that every single sound seems amplified: the dripping of condensation from the ceiling, the faint clattering noise from the floor above and, more than anything else, the sound of Will's own heartbeat pounding against his ribcage like one of Bedelia's birds about to dash itself to death.

There's nothing to fear but fear itself. People say that all the time don't they? Will's heard them; his own father used to say it, remonstrating with him over and over again about his night terrors, his bad dreams, his dread of the darkness and what lay hidden in it. '*It's just a feeling son*,' he'd say as Will lay trembling on the bed, soaked with perspiration and mute with horror. '*Feelings can't hurt you*. *There's nothing to fear but fear itself*.' But in reality it isn't true. It was a lie, just like all the other lies in a false deceitful world…because there are so many things worse than fear. Then for a few tortured seconds he imagines he can feel the Dark Twin watching him with glittering eyes – so at home in the shadows that it has no need of a lantern: still with black blood on its face and dripping gore-stained hands; pale and patient and attentive as it waits to welcome Will to join it in their mutual state of malevolent grace. *You knew*, the Twin is saying. *You always knew*. *Just like you always knew about me*. The Twin is calmly accepting; the Twin feels no dread or distress at all. And this simple fact – and what it means and why it matters – is in itself something that is far, far worse than any level of fear.

Will has now reached the bottom of the steps and he holds his lantern aloft to shine a faint ray of light amidst all swathes of blackness. And it's no good now – not anymore. Because he knows, deep down, that what's kept here is not going to be artworks in any conventional sense of the word. Just as he knows that the terrifying collection of knives and cleavers glistening in the half-light are not innocent implements left over from the kitchen; and just as he knows, when he sees the large stone meat locker in the corner, *exactly* what's going to be inside. He knows all of this, even though every single instinct is screaming with the desperate despairing need not to know. Even though he can feel, at that precise moment, that something inside him has died forever. Even as he rebels at the Twin's quiet satisfaction – its softly fatalistic compliance – and even as he can hear a series of helpless horrified gasps that he knows are coming from him despite not being fully aware of making them. Because how can he be; how can he still be breathing after this, how can his heart be beating? All the vessels and cells and fine blue veins endeavouring away just as they always have, as if they think this is survivable and that life can just continue in the same mechanical way as before.

"*No*," whispers Will and his voice sounds so raw, like if it's been flayed alive; exposed in the shock of recognition as all the hope and humanity are stripped away. "Please no."

No/know: a battle between the necessity of knowing and the ardent urgent desire to remain ignorant and unaware. Yet it's impossible to deny what his own senses are finally telling him, even as his mind thrashes in contortions of increasingly agonised desolation to convince

himself that they're wrong. He knows it's true and yet can't bear the enormity of believing it. Because this is it now; the final act of a drama in which he's unwittingly been playing for months. The game's afoot. *Take your seats. Curtain down. Fade to black*.

And this, after all, is the very final piece of knowledge and which, just like everything else, came far too late. Because what Will also knows is that the clattering sound from upstairs wasn't arbitrary. It wasn't Mary leaving. It wasn't another servant arriving. And he hears the soft breath in the darkness and he knows then – knows without having to turn his head, knows without even having to look – that Hannibal has indeed returned early; has moved silently down the twisting stone steps, just as Will did, and is right now standing straight behind him.

Chapter 23

Once, when he was much younger, Will fell from the limb of a tree during some childish game and jolted every gasp of air from his chest when he landed. The descent itself was almost peaceful – just soundless seconds of floating freefall as the world flashed by in sky and clouds and the leaves of the tree: all calm spectators with no care or emotion, completely impervious to the plight of a small plummeting body. But the impact itself blazed scarlet with pain and shock when the ground finally reared up to meet him and he lay there like a broken bird with wrecked tattered wings as his father screamed with fear and came running and Will gazed up at the empty sky and wondered if this was what dying felt like. That long-forgotten sensation is the same one he experiences now. It's as if he can no longer breathe or stir himself, can no longer operate on even a counterfeit level of competence. Can't think. Can't be. Can't do anything except slowly suffocate in the agonised silence in which nobody moves or speaks as the candlelight illuminates the glittering knives which watch over both of them like sardonic witnesses wrought with silent condemnation. Taut, tense and timeless… suspended animation. Will isn't entirely sure how long it lasts. Isn't really aware of anything anymore except the way that Hannibal is stood there: impossibly tall and imposing in the darkness like a silent rebuke to Will, so blithe and oblivious for so long, for comprehending all the predators around him and never noticing the one that was nearest and deadliest until it was *far too late*. His angular features look vaguely infernal in the flickering glow of the lantern – sharper and much more planed than they normally are – with the shadows sculpting new hollows and shades that appear fiendish and unnatural, like something more belonging to a Medieval tract on Hell than a human face. And Will just stares at him, stupefied and horrified as time both limps and flashes by, and it's only from gazing fixedly at his mouth and the way it's moving that finally helps him realise that Hannibal has broken the silence and is starting to speak.

The words themselves sound like '*Put the knife down Will'* and at first they don't make any sense until Will looks down and realises that he has, indeed, grabbed one from the table and is brandishing it before him with an air of rigidly lethal desperation. He doesn't even remember taking hold of it although of course he must have done because there it is: he can see it glinting in the half-light, his own hand gripped round the handle with the knuckles bleached white from the force of the grip. And there are those words again – '*Put it down'* – and which still don't make any sense, because of course he's not going to relinquish it. Then since he doesn't trust himself to speak he just shakes his head instead; then does it again, strong and clear so there can be no mistake. Nothing could induce him to abandon the knife now, *nothing*. This sliver of metal has become his lifeline, frail and inadequate as it is in the face of such horror, and the only remaining ally between Will and an agonised anonymous slaughter in the bowels of a London cellar. Because he knows that after what he's seen there's no way Hannibal can allow him to leave the house alive. He knows this – knows it irrevocably – just as he knows that while he was scared by Matthew Brown, and frightened by Francis Dolarhyde, he's never in his whole life felt real terror until now.

Hannibal has finally fallen quiet again and is just staring back in blank silence, his eyes more fathomless and intense than Will's ever seen them. How calmly lethal he seems: tranquil and composed in the line of fire, waiting to see what Will's going to do with the weapon. Almost,

thinks Will wildly, as if he's content to sacrifice himself in the service of Will becoming the killer he obviously always aspired him to be. Then he shakes his head again, numb and sickened and no longer sure of what it is he's supposed to be disagreeing with as his mind gives a final flare of anguish at the awareness of how the evening *ought* to have ended. How Hannibal should have walked through the door, snowflakes glistening in his hair like diamonds while brushing the lapels of his coat before dropping his suitcase on the floor and calling out for Will. And how Will would have come downstairs immediately, sauntering and pretending to be casual before abandoning restraint and running the rest of the way as Hannibal held his arms open so Will could go straight into them.

How Hannibal would have pulled away slightly and kissed Will's forehead then cupped his face in both hands and used his thumbs to stroke along the cheekbones. He would have done that, wouldn't he? Probably…probably he would.

How he would have immediately known something was wrong, just as he's always known. *Why are you so pale my love?*

And how Will would have confided immediately, just as he always has. *Someone came into the house. They frightened me.*

The dark eyes would have narrowed at this: the striking amalgam of ferocity and tenderness that's only ever reflected for Will. *Who dared to do such a thing my darling?*

So Will would have frowned in response, perplexed through the scope of such profound uncertainty. *I don't know who it was, I never met them before. But...they looked a bit like you. They had your face. Your voice.*

Fingers stroking through Will's hair now; lips pressing soft kisses against his eyelids. *I would never do anything to harm you, beloved. And if anyone else tried I would kill them.*

Will leaning into the touch, finally settled. Finally safe. *That's how I knew it wasn't really you*.

Then the world shifts again as reality reasserts itself and the image is gone; and Will's breath hitches while his head spins and his heart stutters and he gasps out a small whimpering noise without even realising what he's done. At the sound of it Hannibal's expression flickers indecipherably and he prowls forward with a slowly deliberate tread and holds out a hand. "*Mylimasis*," he says. "Put it down."

The familiar endearment causes Will's shoulders to quiver and his face threaten to crumple in a distinctly ominous way and in that moment it requires every single shred of self-possession to remain in control and simply shake his head again in silently forceful refusal before moving further back. He's not all that far away, only a few feet, and yet it's as if a void has opened up between them: a gaping abyss with Hannibal on one side and Will on the other and a centre steeped in a horror so profound he doesn't even have the words to articulate it to himself. And Hannibal is still there – still just standing there – offering a hand as if to pull Will over to his side of the rift and the sight of it makes him want to scream with revulsion because to be touched in anyway, even with kindness (*especially* with kindness) would be unbearable and the final blow that breaks him. In this respect the memory of their previous

intimacy now feels humiliating – painful, shocking, repellent almost – given that it could obviously never have meant anything and Hannibal must have been calmly experimenting on Will's body the entire time with all the cold, clinical detachment of a laboratory scientist examining a cageful of rats. And now he can hear someone snarling "*Don't come near me*," in a voice that's kinetic with shock and anger; and it takes a few seconds to realise that it's actually him, and that the words have made Hannibal's face flicker again in that indecipherable way. Then he shifts even further back and draws in a desperate lungful of air, forcing himself to forget about everything else as his mind begins to contort itself with a feverish survivalist urgency of how to get out of the house alive. And oh God, the force of this is so swollen and heavy it feels as if his neck could snap beneath the weight because of course he knows without checking that Hannibal will have locked the front door behind him…and Will doesn't have a key. With servants to administer all the gatekeeping he's never had the need for one, but reflecting on it now he's convinced that Hannibal has been planning for this all along – a means to trap Will in the house should the situation ever demand it. His best chance seems to be the gun, currently in the desk of his own bedroom and an impossible three floors away, and yet there doesn't appear to be a better option. Because what else is there? There isn't: *there isn't anything else*. Appeasement? Begging and bargaining? Will prostrate on his knees, pleading with Hannibal not to kill him…or at least to kill him fast and not to linger over it. No, never. It's impossible – *unfeasible* – anger and pride rebel at the thought of it. Then in the corner of his eye he imagines he can see The Dark Twin, coldly curious and unafraid as it prowls undaunted in the shadows; and the knowledge of it is the final thing that causes the panic to boil over and ignites the need to run.

Summoning every last shred of strength Will pivots on his heels and makes himself banish all the dread and doubt as he leans back and then pounces towards Hannibal: bold and purposeful despite his fear, and with all the reckless graceful daring of a young tiger preparing to flex its claws and spring. Hannibal, who's clearly anticipating such a gesture, neatly sidesteps to avoid it then grabs hold of Will's wrist – and in doing so, unbeknown to him, enables Will to accomplish what he'd actually planned for all along, which is to viciously kick out at Hannibal until he loses his balance and Will can make a desperate run for the stairs. Despite his success he's far too overwhelmed to take any satisfaction in the victory and nearly cries out in terror when he loses his footing on the treacherously crooked stone floor – and has an insanely panicked impulse that the house itself is trying to trap him – before righting himself and sprinting up the stairs and slamming the door behind him. There's no sign of the padlock and Will doesn't waste time looking for it, knowing full well the measure of the opponent he's dealing with and that Hannibal, who is always several moves ahead of everyone else in his private game of chess, will already have it safely stowed in his pocket. Instead he wedges a chair beneath the handle with hands that are starting to spasm from shock then hurls himself into the hallway, his breath catching in his throat as he hears the hideous banging sound of the cellar door being forced open. He's wrenched his ankle from the earlier fall and it burns with pain when he puts his foot down but the time to tend to injuries is something he can no longer afford. Time's run out and therefore so must Will, damaged feet or not. Ignoring the way the wounded muscles grind together he grits his teeth and takes off again, using the bannister to haul himself up the final few steps when the pain gets too intense to manage it unaided. Then he takes a few more panting breaths and forces himself to focus in an urgent attempt to stay in control and not allow the nightmare of the situation to overpower his sense of purpose. *Run*, he mutters to himself in a desperate sort of chant. *Don't wait, don't stop, fucking run. Run for your life*.

By now Will feels half-crazed with grief and horror and his internal crescendo of screams have reached a pitch that briefly threaten to push him beyond his remaining shreds of reason. Then he realises he's no longer holding the knife – and has no memory of what happened to it – and the urgent need to be armed refuels his flagging energy and lends even further speed to his injured foot as he flies towards the stairs to the second floor. The house is hushed and motionless as a crypt, rather as if it's holding its breath, and for a few seconds it's impossible not to freeze rigid with a renewed surge of dread as he hears the unmistakable sound of footsteps starting up behind him. They begin quietly at first but gradually grow louder and clearer, the echoing quality horribly amplified in the silent darkness, and there's something about their slow relentless pace that's infinitely more sinister than running. And now, plunging as he is through the crookedly winding pitch-black corridors, it's almost impossible not to compare it to the last pursuit: how Hannibal had hunted him through the house before an arm shot out of the darkness and claimed him. The way Will had been pushed up against the wall, face-first and frantic…and then the hands of an artist or surgeon, deftly graceful yet lethally strong, insistently running over his body like an object to be appraised before taken possession of. '*Do you know how I was able to catch you so easily?'* Hannibal had murmured into his ear. *'Because I tempted you into a false sense of safety. I made you believe the threat had passed when it was actually at its greatest pitch. Never let your guard down Will.*' Only that was back in the days of counterfeit conflict and the ecstasy of intimacy and exchanging recognition; it was all a game, back then. Back then it wasn't real. The conflict, the intimacy, the recognition. *None of it was ever real*.

At the thought of this Will has to clamp his hand over his mouth to stop himself screaming out into the void with a lament of helpless hopeless misery that can only ever be crafted from true despair. Then he does it again, biting down so hard he can taste blood: a salty coppery tang of it blooming across his mouth and staining his teeth. The terror and emotional agony are so acute now it's almost unbearable and there's a part of him that wants to simply surrender in order not to prolong it anymore and accept the inevitability of the worst that can happen. Because, Christ, hasn't the worst *already* happened – didn't it happen months ago? Hasn't it been happening his whole life and left him scorched and naked in the rubble, staggering through smouldering debris as he tries to outrun the fallout. And there's *so much* to run from; so, so much. The threat to his physical safety is merely the most obvious yet it's by no means the only thing, and for a few wretched seconds the enormity of it threatens to overwhelm him all over again. Because what good is bodily integrity when your mind is haemorrhaging all hope and happiness and your spirit is broken, most likely, beyond all repair? Why is he fighting so hard to salvage this pale, scarred, fragile shell of skin and blood when survival would mean living with the knowledge – highlighted in sharply gore-stained shades – of what tonight's revelations are threatening to force him to confront about himself. It's as if he's escaped from the doomed vessel of his own mind, so fatally flawed and slowly sinking his whole life, only to seize the oar offered by Hannibal and discover halfway through the voyage that the paddle was an anchor the entire time. Yet while it's too late to go back it's impossible to venture forwards because there's nothing left except a dead weight: so alluring and promising so much, yet ultimately poised to pull him straight to the bottom.

Will nearly groans out loud again so forces himself to stifle it and by a miracle of effort manages to reach his bedroom and retrieve the gun from the desk before running out onto the landing and concealing himself in one of the alcoves, just as he did before. The footsteps are still approaching – calmly relentless; no mercy in them at all – and the sound makes Will

want to scream all over again with a visceral, devastated blend of fear and shock and anger. And he *is* angry; it's almost a relief to realise it. In that moment he wants to lash out at Hannibal and make him hurt as badly as Will is hurting now. It could be accomplished so simply too. Not even requiring fists or feet or harsh words but merely with forgiveness: because for someone as he now understands Hannibal to be, absolution would be the ultimate form of revenge. Briefly he imagines it, the way he could turn round now and shout it out into the darkness: *I forgive you Hannibal*. It wouldn't matter whether he meant it or not, the impact would be just the same: snatching back all pleasure and satisfaction from what Hannibal has done, because where's the enjoyment in immorality and destruction if you're just going to be forgiven at the end of it? Briefly he remembers Hannibal's mocking adversarial stance towards God in some of their very first conversations, the way Will had found it more shocking than outright atheism. No wonder Hannibal wants to believe in a vengeful Almighty: challenging and confronting God is the devil's ultimate amusement. And the devil, likewise, would feel cheated by forgiveness.

Outside the window the wind is howling again and the force of it is making the house groan and creak like something ancient and pain-stricken clutching its crumbling bones. The footsteps are getting nearer now – inexorable and inevitable as they pound out through the darkness – and the blatancy of it instils another surge of anger. It's just like the original chase: Hannibal being so confident he could catch Will with minimal trouble that he gave him a generous head-start, whereas now he must be so convinced he can subdue him, cajole him, or lie to him to win him over that he's not even bothering to attack by stealth. He wants his prey to know he's there. Will draws another shuddering breath and curls himself further back into the shadows, flinching when he realises the footsteps have abruptly cut off. In fact their sudden absence is somehow more unnerving than the previous pounding insistence; Hannibal must be aware that Will's close by – must have *smelled* him. Must even now be preparing to pounce and drag him out into the hallway, screaming and struggling, in order to confront… what? Will no longer knows anymore. But what he also knows is that with a locked door and a pounding heart and a mind that's broken and bleeding yet still alight with a burning blaze of righteous anger, that it's no longer possible to leave the house without finding out.

The Twin, after all, would never have run. The Twin would instinctively know the scalding force of forgiveness, relentless and insistent as a blade between bones. Deliberate and intimate – and all done with one's bare hands.

Outside in the street the church bells are sounding out midnight, low and sonorous in the middle of the moonlight and the fog. Beyond that it's quiet, hushed and reverent as a graveyard, with nothing to disturb the endless stretching soundlessness…and as Hannibal prowls past, menacingly intent and predatory in pursuit of reclaiming this most precious of possessions, even he finds it impossible to stop himself stiffening as the gun barrel presses against the back of his skull in the darkness.

"I think we need to talk," says Will, his voice rigidly cold and calm. "Don't you?"

*****

By unspoken mutual consent they go to the consulting room: Hannibal lethally coiled and silent, and Will sparking with resentful fury and grimly brandishing the gun the entire time.

Catching sight of the sofa it's impossible to forget the last time they were there and he forces himself not to relive the moment of presenting the regard ring for fear his fragile self-control will snap completely. "'*The cleverness of me*,'" he says instead, the tone bitingly ironic because he's convinced that Hannibal must have been privately mocking him with the reference the entire time. "God, I've been so *blind*. How could I not have seen it?"

Hannibal positions himself in front of the fireplace and draws himself up to his full height, carefully controlled and caustic, then looks Will directly in the eye. "You did see it," he says ominously. "You've seen it for some time; you just didn't want to acknowledge it." In the resulting silence the implication, undeclared yet obvious, wavers in the air like smoke – *because of what it would have told you about yourself* – and Will stiffens slightly before renewing his grip on the gun. "And do you know why you were able to see it?" adds Hannibal in a tone shot through with menace. "*Because I let you*. I let you see *me*. I gave you a rare gift Will – are you really going to tell me you don't want it?"

How did I ever believe you that you didn't have real emotions? thinks Will wildly. Another fatal blind spot, then. Another source of incomprehension amongst so many others. Right now Hannibal seems iridescent with them: something inflammable about to ignite, as if his skin would be white-hot to the touch from burning up with a ferocious, flaring force of feeling. He doesn't need to raise his voice or make elaborate gestures – the kind of demonstrative props other people might use; the kind that Will himself might resort to – but it's there all the same. It's there in the intensity of his expression and the tension of the muscles around his jaw and shoulders, but more than anything else it's in his eyes. Forceful even in his more casual moments they now look as if they're glittering: as if there's an inferno raging behind them that's been stoked by dark longing and vengeful passions, like a fiery avenging angel from some Renaissance painting with sword in hand and baleful blazing eyes. *For the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you…*

"You're frightened aren't you Will?" says Hannibal now as if reading his thoughts and with a voice that's pitched low and chillingly intense. "I can smell it on you. You're not a coward and yet you're radiating fear."

In fact Will's fear and doubt feel like living things, like silent spectators in the room; but he forces himself to ignore them and deliberately flicks the safety catch off the gun with an audible click. "Try me," he says, quiet yet coldly firm. "And look at that Hannibal: seems like your standards are slipping. This time you forgot to take the bullets out."

He defiantly raises the gun a little higher and Hannibal glances at it contemptuously before returning his gaze to Will's face. "Clever boy," he adds softly. "Although you always were remarkable weren't you? You're frightened of me yet you still brought me down here; just as you're frightened of the Ripper and pursue him regardless." He pauses and once again the dark fathomless eyes run over Will's face. "Just as you're frightened of yourself. Of your imagination…your inspiration. I always told you our imaginations were something we had in common. Don't you remember? That's how you found me after all; because we are so very much alike. Without our imaginations we'd be just like all those ordinary people. Yet fear is the price of the instrument. All I've ever tried to do is help you bear it."

“Isn’t that what I’m doing now?” hisses Will with something close to a snarl. “You wanted me to embrace my nature, *doctor*. I'm just following the urges I kept down for so long – ‘cultivating them as the inspirations they are.’”

“Always a dual hunt,” adds Hannibal in the same low voice, as if Will hasn’t even spoken. “The search for the Ripper and the search for yourself; I was merely more invested in one than the other.”

Will gives a grimace of disbelief, so pronounced that he’s practically bearing his teeth. “’*Invested*’? You tried to destroy me.”

“To be a friend to you.”

“Friend! Jesus, are you *mad*? You ruined my life.”

Hannibal’s face flickers slightly at this, although just as before in the cellar Will finds it impossible to interpret the reason for it: sadness, irritation, amusement – it could be anything. Then the blank stare returns as Hannibal takes a slow step forward and Will’s breath hitches as he brandishes the gun with renewed energy. “*Don’t*,” he says sharply. “Come anywhere near me Hannibal and I swear to God I'll kill you.”

“Why are you appealing to God? Do you think he’s listening to you; do you think he’s here right now? Do you think he *cares*? Better to pray to yourself, for yourself.”

“Don’t come any closer,” repeats Will in an eerie mechanical way. “Or – I – will – shoot – you.”

“With God’s sanction? And why not; He won’t begrudge you. Killing feels good to Him too, He does it all the time.”

“And you’d know wouldn’t you?” says Will with another flare of anger. “Christ, the destruction you’ve caused.” He shakes his head, crushed and overwhelmed all over again by the enormity of it. “You're…I don’t even know what you are.” Hannibal quirks an eyebrow as if daring him to continue and in a spirit of rebellion Will resorts to the obvious and snarls: “You really are evil, aren’t you?”

“What, because I’m destructive?” snaps back Hannibal, quick as a whip. “You’ll have to do better than that Will. Storms are evil if it’s that simple.”

Except it’s not that simple, thinks Will bleakly. Of course it isn’t – not anywhere close. It’s such an easy accusation to hurl and yet he knows, deep down, that he no longer relates to these kinds of adjectives, superstitious and antiquated as they are. Words like *wicked* and *evil* are a distraction – dark forces, Original Sin and similar garbage – nothing more than a convenient means to detach, displace and attempt to explain away. Because it’s lazy and inelegant: the notion that evil people do evil things because they’re evil. Hasn’t he always believed that finding humane explanations for inhumanity is far more interesting? Isn’t that the reason he’s still standing here now? Briefly he thinks of his own maladjusted surplus of humanity – empathetic and imaginative to a disturbingly dysfunctional degree – and how it’s become submerged by Hannibal’s inscrutable capacity to both conceal and showcase his own

moral vacuum. Not that it's possible to imagine trying to explain such a thing, even if it were likely that Hannibal would be interested in hearing it. "Bedelia Du Maurier," he finally says instead. "She was here tonight – but I suppose you already know that?" Hannibal's eyes narrow slightly. "Did you send her round deliberately?"

"No. If I'd despatched her with an agenda you would have worked it out immediately. I know how acute you are. Besides, she is not always as subtle as she likes to think she is."

He rolls his shoulders in an elegant approximation of a shrug, and the gesture is so similar to what Will's seen him do countless times in more benign circumstances that he has to briefly bite his lip to suppress the renewed surge of grief. The person who would stroke Will's face or ruffle his hair, who would read him to sleep or pull him close and offer endless patient advice is all contained in that brief movement; and yet the reality is that that person never really existed at all. Because how could they have done? There's surely nothing of them left now, no lingering trace, no afterimage…even the memories of them aren't real. Hannibal narrows his eyes again, obviously trying to intuit the source of this sudden silence, and Will forces himself to regain his composure and ask "But you knew she was coming?" Even in the midst of the anguish, he's still quietly satisfied with how firm his voice manages to sound.

"I told her I would be away. It amounts to the same."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to see what would happen," replies Hannibal with chilling simplicity. "I was curious what she would do. And what you would do in turn."

Despite its toxic smothering fog of fear and outrage, Will's mind is still working quickly enough to deduce the strong inference of this statement: that Hannibal must have orchestrated the discovery from the start and was therefore far less surprised to see Will in the cellar than Will was to see him. Considering the timing it's likewise very plausible that presenting Hannibal with the ring beforehand – such an obvious pledge of devotion as it was – acted as an incentive to raise the stakes and elevate the game to freshly dizzying heights. The idea that Hannibal *wanted* him to finally know, and to accept it, ought to take some edge of the fear; but the implication of what it means for Will himself is too overwhelming to process and he desperately shakes his head in a physical effort to banish it. "I thought it was Dr Chilton that dissuaded Jack Crawford from pursuing the cannibalism link," he says instead. "But it was you wasn't it? It was you the entire time. *It's always been you."*

"Frederick Chilton was determined to get his hands on you," replies Hannibal in the same eerily intense tone. "Those repellent fumbling fingers, so eager to probe and insinuate themselves all over your beautiful mind. I was only the first doctor he approached to collude in a forced committal. There would have been others – and eventually one of them would have agreed."

"*No*!" yells Will, his brittle veneer of self-control finally starting to snap. "Don't you dare. Don't you *dare* pretend you did it for me. You did it for the same reason you did everything else: because *you* wanted to. Because it was amusing. Because you have to prove how much cleverer you think you are than the rest of us." Hannibal frowns, clearly irritated by this outburst, and for a few agonised seconds Will remembers the lecture he saw advertised when

he was still living at Camden Place – *Science and the Machiavelli: New Insights in the Malicious Use of Pharmacology* – and feels like howling with frustration all over again. 'There's none so blind as those who don't wish to see'…just as Zeller said.

"You were drugging him the whole time…Exactly like you did to me." His tone is growing weary now with the constant force of revelation: one crashing over him after another, like waves hurling against a cliff or one of Bedelia's birds dashing itself to death in its cage. "You were so surprised when I mentioned La Salpêtrière weren't you? Remember that – the very first time we met? '*What does the boy from Baltimore know about such things?*' you said." He pauses then gives the same bitterly humourless laugh as before. "I guess you were right to be so sceptical. If I'd really known I'd have figured it out sooner: the existence of compounds that can create a dissociative state. Or were you using hypnosis as well?"

"Must we really waste time discussing Frederick Chilton," snaps Hannibal and the flash of anger, despite its icily controlled veneer, is still intimidating enough to make Will dart his tongue over his lips and tighten his grip on the gun. "Don't squander your remorse on him; in the long-term he'll no doubt rather enjoy taking credit for accomplishments that are not his own."

"Chilton knows he didn't kill anyone. You tried to convince me that I had. That ostler – it was you all along, setting it up to look a certain way. '*Why are you so concerned Will? Is it because you knew where he lived?'"* His hands are starting to shake again but this time it's from anger rather than fear and he takes another deep breath to try and stifle the escalating urge to lose control. "You were just curious what I would do. Someone like me; someone who thinks how I think. Wind him up and watch him go. And apparently, Dr Lecter, this is how I go."

"I knew early on you'd stopped taking the medication," replies Hannibal in the same calmly menacing voice. "Courtesy of your landlady's interference: I told you as much. But by that point there was hardly any need to intervene. Was there Will? You were doing extremely well all by yourself." He takes another step forward – deliberate, almost leisurely – and when Will's hand immediately flies for the gun he goes still before running his eyes over Will's face even more intensely than before. "Look at you," he says softly. "Desperately trying to gather up the shreds of your moral outrage. All your *virtue*. It's inconvenient for you isn't it Will? How compatible we appear to be. How we possess such very…" He pauses, almost mockingly, and when he speaks again the dark voltage in his voice makes it sound as if it's smouldering. "Such very *proportionate* depravities."

"*No*. I'm nothing like you. What you do…"

"And what do I do?"

Will winces, unable to stop his eyes briefly darting towards the pile of coroner's reports and Hannibal follows the line of his gaze and gives the faintest flicker of a smile. "You had no traceable motive," Will finally replies, and it sounds as if each word is costing considerable effort. "It's why you were so hard to see. You configure death as art, as arbitrary. Your grand arrangement: everyone's equally deserving." He runs his hand over his forehead and gives a visible shudder. "They fail your standards of worthiness so you transmute them and create something that warrants exhibition."

“Or consumption,” says Hannibal idly. “One could even deem it commemoration. A memorial of sorts; wouldn't you agree?” The dark eyes swivel back to Will’s face and linger there. “The tragedy is not to die, after all – the only tragedy is to go to waste.”

“Well it’s not like that for me,” hisses Will, sickened even as he's numbly enthralled by this calm delineation and the knowledge of exactly what it's referring to. He can feel his stomach beginning to churn in protest and Hannibal makes no attempt to reply, merely curls his mouth into the same faint smile whose arrogant aloofness makes Will want to scream. “It’s *not*,” he repeats. “I’ve only ever killed someone because I had to.”

“’Someone’ implies the singular.”

“For God’s sake. Fine – I’ve only ever killed *people* because I had to.”

“Oh yes,” says Hannibal. “I know you were forced.” He pauses delicately then snaps his head upright and looks Will directly in the eye. “But no one forced you to enjoy it, did they?” Will goes completely rigid, visibly paling with the shock at the undeniable force of this – like a vicious slap to the face – and Hannibal takes advantage of his inattention to take another calm step forward. “For it to make you feel so ‘alive,’ if you recall,” he adds, almost tenderly. “You once told me I couldn’t reduce you to a set of influences; that you were not a product of anything. But that was not entirely true, was it? Of course it felt good – and why shouldn’t it? It does to God. Only last week in London he dropped a church roof on the heads of 34 of his worshippers, just as they were grovelling for him. He wouldn’t deny you your own brand of alchemy.”

“But it wasn’t supposed to be like that,” says Will, and for the first time since the whole nightmare began his voice comes perilously close to breaking. “*You* weren’t supposed to be like that. I wanted you to accept me for who I am. For *me*. Not just because you wanted some twisted version of yourself.”

Hannibal’s rigid expression finally softens slightly and he takes another step closer before drawing to a halt again. “I did, Will,” he says in a gentler voice. “You never wanted to be loved as much as you wanted to be understood. And yet no one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. With that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved’s potential comes true.” Will glances up, suddenly appearing deeply young and vulnerable, and Hannibal moves even further forward – nearly close enough, now, to touch. “Remember what I told you when we first met: how you couldn’t understand the possibility of inspiration? Consider all those predators that you pursue, the ones whom you can understand so well. You wear their skins and inhabit their minds. Collude with them. Converse with them. Engage and empathise with them – don’t you Will? *And yet you know that they end up destroyed by what they are*. My ambition was always to prevent you being destroyed in the same way.”

Will shakes his head again, exhausted and overcome as he feels the fight finally begin to seep out of him and the angry resentment bleed away while something more haunted and defeated takes its place. What’s left to fight for now, after all? Nothing. *There’s nothing left*. “I should kill you shouldn't I?” he says tonelessly. “First you and then myself.”

“You think so?” replies Hannibal softly. “Perhaps you’re right. Freeing yourself from me and me freeing myself from you; they're the same. Curious isn’t it? Because in spite of it all, in spite of *everything*…” he pauses, allowing the silence to express the inexpressible, all the terror and madness that the moment’s built upon, “united we stand. Recall how Achilles wished all Greeks would die so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone. It took divine intervention to bring them down. There is a fine line between beauty and horror Will, yet see how we have demolished this line. You – and – I.”

“No,” whispers Will through lips that are blanched and white; and he sounds as if he means it even though he knows he’s talking more to himself now than to Hannibal. Because of course it’s true. It’s always been true: that experience of perfect connection, peerless and flawless. Fleetingly he remembers their very first night together, Hannibal stood behind him at the window with his mouth brushing against Will’s throat; dangerous and sensuous and hopelessly magnetic. ‘*You conceal it so well don’t you, Will Graham…but you know that I can still see you*.’ It was always that: that idea of being really *seen*. That all the internal chaos, confusion and darkly distorted despair was perceived and acknowledged and that Hannibal understood all of it and still wanted him anyway. Being seen by someone else – really seen – meant recognition and resonance; it meant witness bearing and testimony…it was something solemn and sincere and *real,* and it meant he wasn’t alone. It was as if there could be no greater way to demonstrate regard than those three small words, surpassing even love itself. *I see you*. As if love was just a pale and unconvincing counterfeit of perception: of the acceptance and awareness that comes from being *seen*.

And he’s tired now…so tired. So exhausted and hollowed-out, as if everything that matters has been scraped away and discarded in a raw reeking heap. Then he numbly remembers Bedelia’s disclosure from earlier this evening, just before the world tipped and everything fell to pieces: ‘*Hannibal is someone who spends a huge amount of time building walls around himself.’* Brick by brick, layer by layer, one after the other over the course of a lifetime. Will: the person finally capable of climbing over them. *Look before you leap*, people often say. He never really considered what he was going to discover on the other side. He didn’t expect to find himself there.

Hannibal takes another slow step forward and once more Will remains motionless, senseless and overwhelmed and no longer able to summon either the energy or resolve to try and prevent him. It’s too much for one person after all: autonomy *and* empathy. Surely it’s too much to bear. “All the agonies and loss and senseless suffering which have gripped you by the throat over the years,” says Hannibal quietly. “Yet see how every adversity nurtured some latent power? You have an uncontainable instinct that holds you up, elevates you into something extraordinary. Embrace your potential Will. Blood and breath are only elements, undergoing change, to fuel your radiance. All you need is forbearance.” Will flinches and Hannibal sees it and makes a soothing sound. “You don’t agree? Then give it a more inspiring name. Call it expectation. Call it *hope.*” He’s so close now, prowling nearer all the time and Will stares on in crushed, defenceless silence. “In my entire life I never desired anything as much as I desired you,” says Hannibal in the same low voice. “I’ll always remember the satisfaction of knowing I had won your trust: something so small, wild and wary as you were back then.” He waits for a few seconds, running his eyes over Will’s face before abruptly darting out a hand – and Will gives a gasp of pain as his wrist is seized in a powerful hold and the gun sharply twisted away. Hannibal makes another soothing noise and rubs his thumb

over the bruise he's made on the pale skin before slowly and purposefully removing the bullets and placing them in his pocket then tossing the gun onto the desk. "I'll always remember the way you looked at me," he adds softly. "The way you stood and sighed and ran your fingers through your hair. The light in your eyes when you finally smiled and how it felt to see you do it. That first meeting Will, do you remember it too? The way you said your name? I wanted to utter your name like something sacred whenever you were away from me because the only consolation in your absence was the memory of when you were there. Yet I could never really predict you, could I? You were often beyond my influence and ultimately my need for you grew likewise. Just another sign of your uniqueness, Will: that even a single look from you could instil a sense of unhappiness and longing in me which I had no capacity to control."

"No," whispers Will, by now more to himself than anything else. "No…no."

"You were a work of art to me," continues Hannibal, and the strain of sadness in his voice is unmistakable. "So achingly beautiful. Both the vitality of youth and the graceful methods of maturity: ferocious and audacious with an exquisitely obscure mind and a dark slender soul. You could never perceive it yourself so I had to see it for you; I had to be your eyes, Will, then hold up the looking glass for you to watch the transformation. You became all the great warriors and philosophers of the world to me, and I wanted to live in a world I'd given up for you with no one else present." He reaches out and tenderly cups Will's face with one hand and it's only then that Will, half-stupefied now with exhaustion and sickly overwhelmed despair, finally sees the flash of silver and realises that Hannibal is still carrying – firmly grasped in his other hand – the knife that Will dropped during the desperate flight from the cellar.

In fact it looks oddly elegant in the dappled gold candlelight with its slim serrated edge and the tapering ivory handle. And it's no longer clear to him whether Hannibal picked it up to prevent Will using it, or because he thought he might need to protect himself, or whether the intent was never defence but rather offence and he's been planning to slice Will apart with the svelte silver blade ever since he first prowled down the cellar steps. But nevertheless there it is; a bleakly suggestive counterpart to what would otherwise be a classic farewell pose with Hannibal's hand against Will's face as they gaze fixedly into each other's eyes: trapped in the grim, tortured anguish of a romanticism they will surely never be able to have that's shot through with craving and rage and an unnerving unbridled passion as they stare at each other's faces and breath in one another's air. They could be stood on the platform of a railway station, or a harbour perhaps: Will with a suitcase in hand, preparing to board a steamer back to America. *Journeys end in lovers meeting*.

"A zero sum game," Hannibal now says and his tone is soft; regretful. "I made you a participant without your knowledge – yet how you played regardless."

But every game must have its ending, thinks Will numbly. Yet he makes no attempt to fight back; no attempt to run. Just stands there, immobile and deadened with a pale face and wide haunted eyes, because he knows that the incredible power of this connection – and what it's revealed to him about himself – has wrapped its hands around the desire to escape and slowly choked it to death: tender yet excruciating, maintaining eye contact the entire time as the last drops of life seep away. Because where would he run to without Hannibal? What would he do

without the other half of himself? It's like waking up from one nightmare only to find yourself pitched straight into another: one in which you can't live with your realisation but can't live without it either. And so he stands there, anticipating a strike that doesn't actually come, as Hannibal rhythmically stokes his hair and finally says, very quietly: "Betrayal and forgiveness, Will. They're best seen as something akin to falling in love."

"Perhaps," replies Will, equally quietly. "If they could only gather together again."

For a few seconds Hannibal's hand goes still before renewing the stroking motion. "She told you about that?"

"Yes." And it's impossible, now, not to remember all the fleeting shades of sadness he thought he'd detected over the past few months: the way Hannibal's eyes would briefly lose focus as if fixating on something just out of reach; the way his voice would grow softer and more yearning before the moment passed and the look faded and the afterimage was so tenuous that Will was convinced he'd imagined the entire thing. And yet it wasn't an illusion at all, but real – real the entire time. "You lost someone didn't you?" he finally says. "Someone you loved?"

"I did," replies Hannibal beginning to gently run his palm across Will's shoulders. "Many years ago now. My fantasy is that what was done could be undone: should the universe contract; should time reverse and teacups come together. And of course it is impossible – God's most malevolent deceit."

"God can't save any of us," says Will in the same low voice. "It's inelegant. Elegance is more important than suffering. That's his design."

"Then we shall have to save ourselves," replies Hannibal. "Won't we?" As Will stares back in silence, quietly lost and enthralled, Hannibal begins to draw him forward as an invitation to rest against his chest: prepared to hold Will up and clearly content to bear the weight of everything within him. "I only had cause to shatter a single cup in the past few months," he adds softly. "Would you like to know what my conclusions were?" Will nods wordlessly and Hannibal finally stops stroking his hair so he can trace a forefinger along his cheek instead as if he's trying to memorise the contours of his face. "That for as long as I have you with me I would be content for it to never gather together."

For a few seconds there's a strained silence in which there's nothing to hear except the crackling of the fire and the wailing of the wind. Then Will makes a slightly broken noise and finally lets go, allowing himself to sink forward and be held and contained as his eyes drift shut and he feels Hannibal's fingers tenderly skimming up and down his back. "I don't know what to do," he says, his voice pale and exhausted. "I don't know how to fix this."

"No?" replies Hannibal gently. "Then I suppose we are going to have to think of something." He brushes his lips against Will's forehead then places the knife onto the desk so he can take hold of his hand. "Tomorrow *mylimasis*; tomorrow we can decide what we are going to do."

"I don't know," repeats Will, a bit despairingly. "I don't know what else there is."

“There is you,” says Hannibal. “And there is me: and beyond that, beloved, nothing else is needed.” Will makes another small gasping noise and Hannibal tightens his grip. “You don’t need to do anything else tonight Will, just keep hold of my hand. Come away with me now; away from all this. Would you do that?”

“I don't know,” whispers Will, whose eyes are still closed. “I don't know.”

“Let me lay you down and touch you and make love to you,” murmurs Hannibal, beginning to stroke his cheek against Will’s hair. “I won't hurt you, I'd be so gentle. Learn to trust me again Will, just like you did the first time. Let me breathe you in and explore all that dark terrain inside yourself. Would you do that? Would you fall asleep in my arms and let me hold you and know you? Allow me to interpret your sense and feeling in the same way that you have breached mine?” His hand, running up and down Will’s spine, finally slows then draws to a halt. “Let me be overpowered by you all over again, beloved; let me lay myself down at your feet. Then tomorrow we can begin anew. From a place of understanding Will: to understand, and to be understood, with absolute clarity.”

But Will just screws his eyes tighter closed and refuses to answer, unable to pledge himself to what it means to say yes yet likewise incapable of committing to saying no. And such a cruelly impossible choice because no matter which way he turns a part of himself is going to be lost. It’s displacement and dislocation – dismemberment – and his whole body hurts from the agonised force of it. He could walk away now. He could *run* away. And yet no matter how fast he moved or how far he fled, the truth of what he’s been forced to confront about himself would cling to him the entire time. It would be like being weighed down by sacks and strong boxes and wrought-iron chests, each one brimming with misery and horror and constant second-guessing that he’d be condemned to carry round, arduously and for all time. Yet if he stays he’s murdering the part of himself that rebels at the Dark Twin’s hypnotic fascination with self-realisation, beauty, horror, and the grimly grinning vigour of death, because you can’t ever be the same once you deny your sense of what you wanted to be and the person you thought you were…and no amount of reasoning or rationalisation can atone for it *because you just can’t ever be the same*. It means a part of him has been betraying himself this entire time – resonating then colluding with another part of Hannibal that Will was likewise unaware of – and it means that the story he’s been telling his whole life about what it meant to be Will Graham was a lie. Then for a few delirious moments he wonders whether this is how a snake feels when it sloughs its skin before his breath hitches with anguish at the thought, because no; almost certainly not. They won’t grieve the loss of it, they don’t cherish or commit to the version of themselves that existed in that moment – merely cast it away and focus on the next incarnation. The snake knows it exists in a constant state of flux and conversion; there’s never only one version of a snake. It’s always on the verge of becoming.

And he knows then that Hannibal was right to take the gun. Because for those few seconds, he feels certain that if he'd still had it he would have killed them both.

Then he pulls away slightly and finally opens his eyes so he can gaze wordlessly into Hannibal’s: seeking some kind of resolution in the darkly soulless stare that’s offering either ruination or salvation, or both, or neither; and so opens his mouth to reply and finds he’s still unable to. He doesn’t know how long he’s been standing there, doesn’t know how much time

has passed; is no longer really aware of anything except the feeling of Hannibal's body pressed against his and the sense that everything the two of them have said and done since the first time they laid eyes on one another was nothing more than a series of dripping crimson footsteps leading up to this moment…poised on the edge of a precipice and ready to fall. A courtship paved with death and destruction and blood-streaked bodies, contorted and lifeless and carved apart, yet still strangely beautiful even in the midst of the carnage. And it's because of this – because he's so helpless and so enthralled – that when he hears the sound of breaking glass he can't take it in beyond a startled intake of breath, and he doesn't immediately register that something's wrong because he's already so convinced that nothing can ever possibly be right again.

Not then. Not in those few seconds.

It's not really until he hears the gunshot. When he hears Hannibal gasp with pain and feels him fall forward against his chest, and when Will himself cries out in shock before screaming Hannibal's name. And it's when Will has wrapped his arms around him, using all his strength – all of himself, everything he has – to try and keep him upright and he looks over Hannibal's shoulder and sees the dark figure standing by the gaping remains of the shattered window, illuminated in the half-light like some spectral silhouette sent straight *From Hell* – just as the letter promised.

It's only really then. Only when he finally stares up into the face of Francis Dolarhyde.

And when Francis Dolarhyde stares straight back.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> Lovely to hear from all the new readers who've recently come aboard – welcome to ~~the madness~~, ~~the Victorian Murder Porn~~, the fic. In this respect, huge thanks to everyone who got in touch about the last update; I was so touched by the response and it gave my faltering Writing Mojo a big kick up its lazy arse. So welcome to an earlier-than-usual Chapter 24 – although please be aware that this one contains graphic descriptions of violence throughout.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's much taller than Will had imagined he could be. Broader too, with even his slack ill-fitting clothes failing to fully conceal the way the powerful muscles twist and pulse like thick coils of wire across his arms and chest. His skin is extremely pale in the clammy unwholesome manner of something starved of sunlight and forced to live in the damp and the dark, yet his features overall are surprisingly good – strong and well-shaped – with the only thing preventing consummate attractiveness being a slight deformity of the upper lip where the skin gapes apart as if the two halves are reaching out to converge and fated always to fail. It means at certain angles the teeth are more exposed than they should be, rather like the muzzle of a dog, although of course none of this matters – none of it matters at all – and it's hardly important whether he's tall or slim or attractive or unsightly as opposed to the fact that he's *there*. And it seems so unbelievable that he is, even though it's happening, because such a mythic quality has been built up around him that it's scarcely feasible there could be an actual man crouching behind it all: a living breathing human being subsumed beneath the pitch black howling headlines and the weight of the newsprint, which screamed so loudly all over the world yet were still never quite as loud as the fearful whispers and whimpers in the dark London alleyways. Count Dracula or Professor Moriarty might just as well have crawled off of their pages and climbed into the room and it would have been just as unreal. Just as unreal as Jack the Ripper.

Because of course that's who it is. And the reason Will knows this is because he speaks with The Voice, and he'd recognise those mechanically grating syllables no matter where he heard them. He'd know them in his memory, or in his nightmares, or in the blind blackness of an alleyway, or in the middle of a consulting room in Harley Street with the wind sobbing and screaming through the shattered window as the strewn glass glints in the moonlight and Hannibal's blood streams all over his hands from where he's lying in Will's arms quietly bleeding to death from a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Will can see the blood every time he looks down – dark and thick, curiously shiny – and he can feel it too: how warm and wet it is and the way it pours and surges. Blood and moonlight and shattered glass (which also won't gather together) and everything either black or glittering with Will at the back and Jack the Ripper at the front and Hannibal in between them, quietly bleeding to death. It's at this point that Will realises he's gone into shock and that this is why he isn't screaming or crying

or doing anything that would be considered normal or natural in such a waking nightmare, but simply gazing at the tall looming figure in front of him in stunned silence while blood flows all over his hands and pools onto the floor. Flowing from Hannibal as he lies there, so quietly and soundlessly, and slowly bleeds to death.

He still feels warm beneath Will's hands. Humid, almost, even as Will himself is freezing from within as his body contracts and his mind folds and his limbs grow slow and uncoordinated like a marionette being jerked and tugged by a clumsy operator who doesn't know how…who doesn't understand. And Francis Dolarhyde takes a step forward, seeming to slide from one patch of moonlight to another, as Will stares at him numbly with eyes that can still see and perceive and yet are trapped in a world that's at once too close and confining, yet still much too far away. Dolarhyde moves gracefully for someone so tall and broad, yet also purposefully, and as he edges closer Will can see the wet gleam of his teeth and realises that he's begun to speak: that he's releasing The Voice so it can slither across the room, leaving smears of blood as it goes like the slimy tracks of a snail, and address itself to Will with all the coldly fervid fury of before.

"You betrayed me," The Voice is snarling. "You betrayed me, Mr Graham."

And Will stares back. Says nothing. Feels the blood on his fingers and the way it's flowing and says nothing.

"I chose you for a great honour," says The Voice. So insistent and pervasive: it doesn't care about the blood and the silence; doesn't care that Hannibal is lying in Will's arms with a bullet inside him. "You were to tell the people to prepare themselves." There's a pause and The Voice drops even lower, grating and discordant as rusty metal as it grinds out of Dolarhyde's mouth. "*To prepare themselves for the coming of The Dragon*."

So Will closes his eyes as he hears himself replying "I know" in a tone so flat and empty it clearly translates as: *And I don't care*. But it's not like it was in the alleyway: there's no point in appeasement, not anymore. The whole point of keeping someone happy is to avoid the worst outcome and so placating or pacifying this creature is useless because the worst has already happened. It's lying there right now; it's bleeding to death in front of him.

"You came back to the hospital, didn't you?" adds Dolarhyde and Will gives another slow nod. Why is he even asking? He clearly already knows: he was probably there all along, eyes cold and dead as a shark's with their crazed yellowish tinge and flickering from behind the William Blake postcards as Will and Jack spoke with the warden for a second time. Dolarhye stares for a few more seconds then there's a sudden sharp inhale: an angry hitch of breath that's venomous and resentful yet still scored around the edges with something Will's empathic register can't fail but recognise as sadness. "Just the very next day, Mr Graham – *still trying to hunt me*." He takes a step forward and flexes his hands, which are red around the knuckles and as large and lumbering as the paws of a bear. "You knew what you did and you *dared* to try and hunt me?"

"Yes," replies Will, and he says it in the same flat tone because it's true, and because he still doesn't care. The Voice is continuing to rasp and snarl but it's getting harder to listen now: words like *betrayal* and *disrespect*…there might even have been an *injustice* in there somewhere too. Noble, weighty words that belong in a courtroom or the pages of some

moralising novel yet lose all their meaning in a scene like this where justice and nobility no longer have any value. No one in the room is noble; they don't subscribe to conventional ideas of honour. And then: *Don't leave me*, thinks Will desperately as he tightens his grip on Hannibal. *I need you*. *Oh God, stay here, please please, just like you wanted me to stay with you*. *We've one last goodbye between us.*

"I made you privy to a great becoming," concludes The Voice and the bitterness is unmistakable. It still thinks Will is listening; it thinks he *cares*. "And you recognised nothing."

Beneath Will's hands Hannibal shifts slightly. He's been so motionless for so long that Will registers the movement straight away and glances anxiously down, only to experience something like shock to realise that – contrary to expectation – the dark eyes are neither closed nor unfocussed but instead pinned on Dolarhyde with all of their familiar intensity and quite obviously tracking each nuance of the exchange. Briefly they swivel onto Will's face before moving back to Dolarhyde and Will tightens his grip then forces himself to look up again too. His heart is pounding in a weird, unnatural rhythm: a pulsating throb that's dramatically different to the way it skittered so fearfully earlier in the evening. *I am going to kill you*, he thinks now, eerily calm and icy cold as he protectively strokes his palm up and down Hannibal's arm. *Before tonight is over I swear to God I am going to kill you*. Then he presses down against the bullet wound, trying to apply some pressure because it's the only thing he can think of to do and for a few seconds feels Hannibal's own fingers brushing lightly over his. The knife is still lying on the desktop from where it was discarded only minutes ago and Will sees it now and experiences a need to possess it that's so powerful it's impossible to stop his body swaying yearningly in its direction. Dolarhyde, mistaking the cause of Will's unrest, immediately takes a quick step across the room. "*Don't run*," he spits out. "If you run I'll catch you."

"I'm not going to run," replies Will, his tone low and chillingly intense. "But let him go." Dolarhyde shakes his head and Will leans further forward, his eyes blazing with barely concealed anger. "*Let him go*. He's got nothing to do with any of this."

Dolarhyde's mouth twitches contemptuously, exposing his teeth even further as the fissure on his lip spreads wider apart. "*No*."

"Indeed no," says Hannibal. The sound of his voice is unexpected – clear and strong in the silence – and in spite of themselves both Dolarhyde and Will jump slightly at the sound of it. "You wish for us both don't you?" adds Hannibal in a more softly insinuating tone. Dolarhyde hesitates then frowns, seemingly unsure of whether the obviousness of the question means he's being mocked, and Hannibal lets the silence stretch out before finally clarifying: "You wish…to change us."

Dolarhyde's face spasms at this, a layer of jerking muscles that leap and convulse as if insects are crawling beneath the skin. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, clearly encouraging him to continue, and when he speaks again his voice has thickened: curdled and coagulating, just like the way the blood clotted across his knife that night in the alleyway. "In dying, you meld with the strength of the Dragon."

“To be visited by such a Being in its true form,” says Hannibal, his tone a combination of fascination and soft menace. Then his eyes narrow very slightly before a faint smile flickers across his face and there’s something about the inscrutability of it that’s deeply unnerving: the sense of a gauntlet being thrown down. “It is a glorious and rather discomforting idea,” he adds calmly, and once again his fingers brush suggestively across Will’s.

“I shall relive it afterwards,” replies Dolarhyde, and this time there’s a ripple of rapture in the grating voice that’s almost sensual in its intensity. “And it will be wonderful. But not as wonderful as the act itself.”

Because someone has to be close, thinks Will wildly. *Someone has to be close when the Dragon comes*. He can remember it now, just after being attacked in the alleyway – Hannibal describing how he saw a figure stealing away down Harley Street in the middle of the night. Only no one thought much about it at the time and Hannibal had returned to his newspaper while Will poured a second cup of coffee, allowing their feet to brush together unseen beneath the table as the servants tiptoed around in discreet oblivion. How could they ever have known what the figure really meant? Known that it was watching the house deliberately, slinking back to its lair by day so it could plot a strike at night? That while they were gazing into one another’s eyes in the midst of newspapers and coffee and servants that that the figure was planning its revenge; that its longed-for reckoning was so close at hand? How could *anyone* have known?

“You are to be congratulated,” Hannibal is now saying to Dolarhyde. “You were seized by a fantasy world, with the brilliance and freshness and immediacy of childhood. It took you a step beyond alone.” He’s using the low rhythmic tone that Will recognises so well – an invitation for the listener to slowly drown and stifle amidst the proffered temptation of fatal intimacy and understanding – and the effect on Dolarhyde is palpable in the way he relaxes his hold on the gun and takes a few shuffling steps backwards: ungainly and vulnerable and, just for those few seconds, slightly childlike in his frailty. Will stares at him too, his deductive instincts temporarily unable to avoid dissecting this prey that he’s been hunting so long. *I know you now*, he thinks to himself. *I know that a part of you – whatever’s in there that’s still human – understands what you’re doing is wrong but that you’ll never stop because the death of those women gave you a feeling of power and fulfilment that’s unavailable to you anywhere else in your life. I know that killing makes you feel God-like and that you want to possess your victims completely, even in death. I know that in murdering them you are trying to murder your own sense of misery and inadequacy. I know all this, but the thing is – I don’t care. I don’t care anymore about understanding you. I only want to stop you. And then after that, I will destroy you utterly.*

Will drags in a lungful of air as Hannibal’s fingers continue to move over his own, intimate and entangled amongst the blood. Then he glances up once more and sees the way that Dolarhyde is gesturing at them with the gun, clearly expecting them to get up and follow him; and he finally realises that whatever else his intentions are they’re not going to be enacted here. Not in the middle of Harley Street with servants and neighbours and the police just minutes away. Whatever it is he wants to do obviously requires something a little more… private. Because of course it does. He wants to take his time, doesn’t he – he wants to linger over it.

But with a gun in his face there's little Will can do except arduously get to his feet in resentful compliance. He does his best to support Hannibal to do likewise and is struck by the fact that, beyond a brief wince of pain, he gives no indication of complaint as he walks towards the door. Nevertheless the purposeful stride and powerful limbs still can't detract from the trail of blood that he leaves behind him like a smattering of crimson tears; and Will sees it and renews his previous slaughterous pledge to Dolarhyde that's summoned from a part of himself that's half flayed from shock while the remaining half burns and flares with anger. Then he consoles himself that all it really requires is to be patient a little longer. Just like fishing: merely a case of planning, persistence and patience. *Infinite* patience. Then you set your bait, cast your lure, and wait for your prey to ensnare itself.

Dolarhyde heads up at the rear, removing a cap from his pocket as he does so that he proceeds to tug down over his face. The sight of it is striking in its eerie distortion and immediately reminds Will of the first time he ever saw him: that sinister figure in the National Gallery, rapt in worship at the pedestal of William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: in a way that was where everything really began…and also, most likely, where it's all going to end. Then he remembers standing outside the gallery afterwards, concealed in the shadows as Hannibal's long fingers curled round the back of his neck. "*Innocence and Experience*," Hannibal had murmured in that low, rhythmic tone. "*The two contrary states of the human soul. So which one are you? Which one do you want to be?"*

As they walk out into the street the wind cuts across Will's face like a knife while the snow swirls across his feet and the moon's pale face watches over them in silent sterile oblivion as Dolarhyde gestures towards a filthy carriage that's drawn up at an erratic angle in front of the house. Will helps Hannibal into it first then climbs in behind him, tenderly covering him up with his own coat before gazing numbly through the window at the way Harley Street is vanishing into the distance. He has a strong sense that he'll never see it again, at least not in the way it is now. And that's because he knows, with a quiet sense of acceptance and inevitability, that even if he survives tonight the person who comes back can never be the same as the one who was taken.

Songs of Innocence and Experience. As Will waits for the journey to come to an end and reveal whatever destiny looms at its conclusion, he passes the time in using his precise, eidetic memory to re-envisage the extract from Blake's most famous poem that was displayed in the gallery on that fateful day. It was stencilled onto the wall for everyone to admire, right next to the Great Red Dragon: a treatise on omnipotence, sublime mysticism, and an elusive creature that blazes with an unknown inner force. Yet also, right on the last line…the sacrificial Redeemer.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

And when the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

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In the end the carriage ride is surprisingly short, 20 minutes at most, and passes in agonised grinding suspense as Will grips onto both of Hannibal's hands which feel cold and immobile beneath his own as if all their force and vigour has been drained away. He's already decided that the most unnerving thing of all is the silence, because he's so used to hearing Hannibal's low voice with its rumbling smoky vowels holding forth about anything and everything that to have it muzzled is almost unbearable. In fact the uncommunicativeness is so uncharacteristic that he's urgently hoping it's deliberate and that Hannibal is being mute on purpose in order to create a certain effect on Dolarhyde…and perhaps he is; but there's no way to really be sure. Dolarhyde, in turn, sits across from them with the gun in his lap, just as silent as Hannibal with his eyes gleaming occasionally from beneath the shadow of the cap, and Will stares back at him and loathes him while praying to a God he doesn't believe in for a form of deliverance that never arrives. The carriage doesn't get stuck in the snow. It doesn't falter or overturn. The horses show no sign of tiring. Will has no idea who the driver is: whether he's been threatened into obedience by Dolarhyde, or is a confederate of some kind or, most likely of all, has been offered a sum of money for which he's so desperate that it's blinded him to the legality, morality or otherwise of what's taking place. But whatever the reason the end result is the same and he makes no attempt to intervene after he's drawn the carriage to a halt and deposited the three of them on a wretched-looking stretch of wharf along the banks of the Thames – and which Will knows beyond doubt is to be the setting for the killing grounds…their own personal amphitheatre for a fight to the death.

In fact as arenas go it's an inauspicious one – hardly a location for glorious combat of the gladiatorial kind. The air is frigidly cold, and eerily silent beyond the low roar of the river which snakes out behind them like a length of black ribbon and bears no resemblance to the one of Will's daydreams in that it's as dark and viscous as tar in the moonlight with disfiguring streaks of foam and grease on the surface and a stale nauseous smell. Surrounding them on all other sides are wrecked and crumbling warehouses which stare down with blank black windows amidst a chaotic labyrinth of crates, casks, cranes and assorted junk for the maintenance of boats, all heaped and snarled together like the limbs of a rotting tree. Stunted silhouettes crouch in every corner with river mist creeping across them like skeletal fingers that twitch and tremble, and in the far distance Will can see a tiny boat illuminated by a lone lantern swaying on a stick, eerie and spectral in the inky darkness, that he immediately recognises as the haunting vessel of a Waterman: amateur sailors whose sole occupation is removing unclaimed corpses from the treacherous depths of the Thames. Beyond that there's nothing, no living creatures at all beyond the three of them. And yet they *are* still living…all three of them. He lowers Hannibal down onto a nearby stack of wooden crates then

protectively moves in front of him, briefly pressing his palm against his chest as he does so. Hannibal's heartbeat feels surprisingly steady. *Live, live*, Will urges him now in a silent plea. *Oh God, please, I need you to live for me*. *Survive. Live. Thrive*.

Then he gets to his feet and turns round, his face cold and set and his expression unreadable. It feels so different to how he was Matthew Brown: no wince of distaste or blaze of anticipation, not even a grimace of fear. In fact in that respect there's a sinister inertia on both sides, with Dolarhyde likewise fixed in place in front of Will like a blasted slab of stone, the only movement coming from where his long coat is catching in the wind. It's no longer possible to see his eyes because they're so obscured from the shadow of his cap, but Will can see the glimmer of teeth from the fissure of his top lip as well as the way his breath is heaving in the frozen air in a series of icy billows. The rage and revulsion are so strong the air is choked with them and Will feels as if they're starting to colour his vision, like a veil of scarlet gauze draped across his face – yet still neither he nor Dolarhyde speak or move. *I want to kill you,* thinks Will; and then exalts in the powerful truth of it, even though the statement is insufficient because he knows that killing Dolarhyde is no longer enough. He wants to destroy him. He wants to tear him into tatters and scatter the dripping remains to the wind: demolished so utterly there isn't even anything left to put in a casket for the young blind woman to mourn over. And then he becomes aware of the other key difference from Matthew Brown, because this time there's no sign of the Dark Twin prowling around scenting for blood. No ruptured splitting at all, in fact. There's just him, ready to do what needs to be done. Just one person – just Will Graham.

Dolarhyde has now replaced the gun with a knife: long and wickedly sharp with a rusty blade that glints in the moonlight like grinning teeth. Then he takes a step forward, raising the knife as he does so, and it's this gesture more than anything else that jolts something in Will and makes him come rushing back to himself. He was only gone a few seconds, half a minute at most, and yet it feels like a lifetime before something shifts and the world is no longer monochrome and slow but fast-paced, pulsating and saturated in colour, albeit mostly shades of black shot through with silver and crimson. Except *something* that shifts isn't just anything; and Will knows it was the awareness that even if Hannibal is fatally injured, right now he's still alive: and for as long as that lasts, the only thing between him and this phantom figure, this Francis Dolarhyde – this Jack the Ripper, this Great Red Dragon – is Will.

Not that he entirely knows any more what it is he's really fighting for. To save a life or to lose one…he doesn't even know if he can save himself. Maybe not – not anymore. And maybe that's just fine.

And Dolarhyde has come alive now too, just as Will has: is bearing down on him in a series of long strides as his coat streams out behind him and his eyes pierce through the shadows and the knife gleams and the teeth glint through the gap in his face. Eyes-teeth-knife, looming closer all the time. "You first Mr Graham," he says and his tone is burning up with menace. "It'll be easy to break your back – better than killing you. Break your back and twist it, just to be sure. They'll have to roll you to your next investigation."

It's just us now, thinks Will with a blankly destructive wildness. *Just us, playing games in the dark of the moon*. It's what he came all the way from America for after all; what's he's hunted through every reeking crevice of London for…what's he's been waiting his entire life

for. *This, this, this*. Even though the odds are stacked against him and he doesn't have any significant chance of success, there's no choice anymore except to continue playing the game. So he flexes his whole body, preparing to spring as his eyes scan the environment for anything to use as a weapon. If he can't locate one he's more than prepared to use his hands, but his luck holds when he spots the handle of a rusty hatchet protruding from a wood stack just a few feet away. And Dolarhyde is really coming for him now, charging and maddened like a vengeful beast of prey, so Will dives beneath his outstretched arm and hurls himself towards the hatchet just as the knife comes slicing through the air and whistles past his ear with a shrill, high-toned wail like something crying.

For a few sweetly victorious seconds Will's fingers grasp the handle, and he gives an urgent tug to free it from the rotten wormy wood in which its embedded before letting out a gasp of pain as someone grabs his shoulders and violently swings him away. Dolarhyde gives a grunt of satisfaction, his movements unnaturally fast and his grip unfeasibly strong, as he pinions Will around the throat and jerks his head back. Will summons all his strength to twist himself free, kicking backwards at the same time with enough force to make Dolarhyde roar in anger, and for a few moments it looks as if he might be successful when there's a sudden explosion of pain as the world goes white, then red, and his face feels as if it's on fire as something slices straight through his cheek, splintering the edge of the bone as it thrusts into his mouth. It's impossible to scream, so he doesn't, but he can hear a stifled panting sound that he knows is coming from him: the sound of someone starting to choke on their own blood.

Dolarhyde is grunting with the effort of suspending Will upright, knife-in-face and balanced almost delicately, like a living sculpture of carved-up skin and scorched-down pain before Will is suddenly on the ground again and wrenching the knife out his cheek with brutal efficiency so he can thrust it into Dolarhyde's leg – and who pulls it straight out again and smashes it into Will's collarbone in return. The large hands are grappling across the handle now, clearly intent on using the blade for leverage to force Will's shoulders apart until his spine snaps, and Will snarls with anger before fighting back with an urgency and desperation that's unfailing despite the sense there's no clear chance of victory. So even though the hope and strength is haemorrhaging faster than his ruined face, it never occurs to him to give up. He can hear himself chanting a desperate denial in his head – *No-no-no-no-no* – and that it's not coming from a reluctance to die, or even a genuine fear of it, but from a hard-grained finely wired refusal to allow this creature to simply claim him without a fight. And so he summons an almost supernatural level of effort and continues to resist – ferocious, fierce and lethally effective as Dolarhyde grunts all over again with the effort and frustration of it like something driven and guttural and inhuman as Will battles on against the onslaught, grimly determined and grittily resolute despite the horrific wounds and failing strength, and refusing to even cry out with pain when the knife is twisted deeper above his collarbone. Dolarhyde grinds his teeth in fury, clearly frustrated that someone so physically slight and small compared to himself has not been the easy opponent he anticipated…and Will's getting ready to kick out at him again when suddenly Dolarhyde's being tugged away, forcing him to drop Will who plummets down to the ground once more.

As Will rolls onto his back he draws in a lungful of freezing air as he feels his eyes starting to widen in shock…brightly burning shock at the realisation that the unbelievable has happened. It's impossible – unfeasible – yet it's still there playing out in front of him, and it that means the rules have irrevocably shifted; it means the game has changed. Because contrary to all

hope or expectation, something even deadlier than a Great Red Dragon has just appeared from out of the shadows and is now clinging onto Dolarhyde's back – not dead at all, not dying – and still just as silent as before, and still just as pale and blood-stained; but, oh God, so incredibly *alive*.

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For a few seconds – only a few; only the length of a heartbeat – Will remembers their Harley Street confrontation and he understands that if Hannibal had stood still long enough then Will would have certainly tried to kill him; just as if Will had moved enough to leave then Hannibal would have killed him likewise with that glinting little knife. *Come back. Stay here*. Perhaps that was always going to be their fate? *I knew you would keep running if I kept chasing you. I knew you wanted me to know exactly where I could find you when I needed to*. It truly is a zero sum game, just as Hannibal said: insoluble and indivisible, with each gain and every loss balanced out on the other side…and yet how impossible it is for either one of them to see the other harmed by someone else. Then Will blinks and the moment is gone, and he's forcing himself to ignore the ferocious pain in his face and chest and struggle to his feet because he sees that Hannibal, weakened by the bullet wound, has failed in his attempt to snap Dolarhyde's neck and has instead been flung off his back and onto the floor. And that Dolarhyde nevertheless looks confused and unfocussed, unable to fathom where this new threat appeared from because he believed he was only dealing with one person when all along there was actually two…and always has been.

Although he must be in as much pain as Will is Hannibal appears undaunted by the blow and lands on the ground in a way that's almost cat-like before rolling to the side of the wood stack, where Will knows without even looking that he'll have likewise spotted the glint of the hatchet. With Hannibal and Dolarhyde possessed of weapons this means only Will remains unarmed and he urgently looks around for something to use. But beyond slivers of rope and scraps of rotten wood there's nothing – and Dolarhyde is bearing down on him again like some relentless nightmare figure and Will still has no realistic prospect of being able to stop him. Unless…fleetingly he glances down at where the knife handle is lodged in his chest. The thought is actually rather unbearable – agonising, possibly even dangerous – and yet there's nothing else close by and no other solution to hand. So Will grits his teeth and with a wetly crunching twist he tugs it free, ignoring the cascade of blood that sprays across the ground the second the blade is removed before flinging himself forward so he can thrust it as deeply into Dolarhyde's back as he possibly can. He barely registers the resulting howl of anger and pain although the act itself is alight with all possible sensation: the way the blade feels carving through flesh and snapping off bone as the skin ruptures and the muscles slice apart. And so Dolarhyde screams again then lunges for Will, eyes burning with rage and teeth exposed in a snarl, so focussed on retaliation with both fists and feet that he's insensible to Hannibal approaching silently behind him.

Hannibal's movement is more effortful and less fluid than usual, being clearly hampered from the bullet wound. But it still doesn't prevent him dropping down, lithe and agile with silent stealth, and smashing the axe straight into Dolarhyde's leg as Will looks on. The attack is decidedly underhand, the type of thing that would have no place in an honourable fight – but then how else do you behave when conventional honours no longer have value? Is it possible to behave well then; is it even desirable to do so? As Jack Crawford would say:

There is a wisdom longer than considerations of honour. So Will leaps back, supple and nimble despite his terrible injuries, and allows himself to revel in how incredibly and acutely attuned the two of them have become: sensing and anticipating the other's movement in a way that's graceful and almost balletic – the ultimate *danse macabre* – and even amid the choking, grinding agony of it feels a fierce sense of exhilaration that burns even brighter than the pain. Victory is so close, close enough to touch and taste, because Dolarhyde is clearly fading now: crashing down onto one knee like a huge tree being felled before buckling as Hannibal jumps onto his back once more. It leaves his torso completely exposed, curiously vulnerable looking now despite the strength and power of it, and as Hannibal's eye briefly meets Will's it's then that he understands the responsibility for the final fatal blow belongs to him – and that this is the way it needs to be.

He could hand the knife to Hannibal of course. He could even abandon the scene altogether: he could call for help, call for the police…so many things he *could* do.

But what he does instead is draw back the knife with a hand that is completely steady, judging the best angle in the blink of an eye and with all the quiet exaltation of the hunter whose patience and planning has finally been compensated. *To the Devil his due*, thinks Will with blank finality. Then he pivots forward and slams the blade into Dolarhyde's stomach before wrenching it downwards, not even flinching as the blood spurts onto him in a boiling stream. Dolarhyde screams out again and kicks Will away, wrenching the knife out of his body with a slickly nauseating sound that's straight from an abattoir as he staggers forwards – just as Hannibal leans in and rips out his throat with his teeth.

As Dolarhyde plunges and reels Hannibal lets go of him then neatly drops to the floor, flexing his shoulders and staring on in eerily silent spectation as the prey crumples downwards while blood cascades from his throat and stomach, streaming out on either side of him in scarlet streaks like a pair of dragon's wings. And Will lies crumpled a few feet away, silently numb and enthralled, as the scene plays out and the game comes to an end and Hannibal's words from all that time ago reassemble themselves and replay in his head:

We can relinquish our control together – like a leap of faith from the same precipice. The same plunge into the same abyss at exactly the same time. But what you also have to know is that it's only one kind of consummation because a relationship can be sealed in all manner of ways. I know you don't yet understand what I mean; you can't imagine what else we might do beyond this. What other ceremonials or acts and rituals might exist. What we might accomplish side-by-side to formalise things. But you shall.

Blood, breath, bone, skin: a cauldron of destructive ecstasy in the slaying of a Great Red Dragon. A commemoration for the death of the old and a consummation for the beginning and becoming of the new.

And finally, at last…he understands.

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In the silence and stillness Will lies on his back and stares up at the heavens: glinting stars, slightly misty and vaporous from the fog, with the moon hanging above them like a piece of bright bone amid the soft roar of the river. They're the same stars that shone on him when he

was in America and have watched over him every night since he was born; those little luminous spheres in the sky that are constant and unchanging yet which feel as if he's looking at them tonight with eyes that are seeing them for the very first time. It's as if a veil has been lifted as little by little the outlines and colours of the world steal out of the shadows and refashion themselves into something fresh and new, starting first of all with the stars. He doesn't know the names of the constellations although suspects that Hannibal would probably know. And of course he can see them too, just as Will can, because right now some of their stars are the same.

This is me, he thinks; and the truth of it is both agonizing and exhilarating in its rawness. *It is. Like it or not, this is who I am. I'm an inheritor: I have the power to give myself up*.

It's so quiet now the sound of the fight has died. Hushed and reverent: nothing to hear at all except the pounding of the Thames and the way his breath is seeping up his chest and out of his mouth before sinking back in again. Just Will, lying there in the moonlit and the midst of carnage and distortedly deformed delights – a beautiful broken tragedy – yet aware of a haunting sense of peace in spite of it that burns with exquisite pain like a form of purification: wrested from the horror just as Pegasus emerged from the head of Medusa. Or even the lightning bolt that courses from the spilled blood of a dragon. You might say that, perhaps? He supposes he could say that – if he wanted.

Everything hurts but the pain has almost become a part of him now and it's easier to just breathe it in and out and accept it's there than drive himself mad with the impossible endeavour of banishing it. But there's also something else flickering at the edge of his consciousness, and when he focuses on it he slowly grows aware of the prowling presence of the Twin. It's the first time he's felt it since being taken from Harley Street yet it bears little resemblance to the grotesque figure from the cellar because now it's simply standing there, neglected and forgotten: stripped of its power to devastate because he can finally see it for what it is – a caricature woven together from fear and ignorance in the chambers of Will's own mind. *I'm more than just you,* he thinks quietly. *You're not who I am*. The Twin stares back, pale and watchful as ever with its glassy dark eyes, but Will ignores it and slowly raises his arm upwards, tracing his fingertips against his face as he gazes into the sky and right there, in the still of the night and the silence of death, begins to compose a letter to himself like a dispatch from the battlefield as all the fractured shards and fragments of the past few months begin to finally slot into place.

Dear you, it begins – because *dear* means something valued and cherished. It means 'beloved.' And *you* is the pronoun of possession. It means identity, nature and character and it's the meeting place where the fragments finally merge together and Become.

So who are you then, really?

You're Will Graham.

You're 25 years old. You're an American in London yet you're also from the Old Germanic Willelm meaning 'bold warrior.' You have dark impulses and a killer instinct with autonomy, empathy and an inspired imagination. You're sovereign and self-commanding, relentless and resolute. And you defy simple categorization: you're self-sustained and self-conceived and always have been.

Your mind's been broken and your soul's been starving your entire life, yet you've still clawed your way through the misery and horror and emerged from it all unbowed and unbroken. You've steered your own course, made your own rules and conceded to no one. And you belong to yourself – you will never give up your identity to another person. You'll retain your own moral code and refuse to see human life as eternally and pointlessly disposable, even if you have a predator's instinct when the situation demands it and can exalt in the malevolent beauty of death.

Your true self isn't what you believed yourself to be – or even what you wish you were – but what you've spent your whole life trying to hide from yourself and conceal from the world. But you still defy a simple, binary division between good and bad. They're entangled in you, not always possible to tease apart: interconnected and interdependent, and harmonious because of it. You're both guilty and not guilty, both right and wrong. You're a human hall of mirrors. You are shifting and indeterminate and constantly altering according to the context.

You will live your life fully and completely and therefore rediscover yourself: who you are and what you stand for, the things you will no longer be, how far you'll go, how much is enough, and what you will allow yourself to Become.

You are centre stage and you are curtain up. You are a phoenix emerging from your own ashes and you will raze the old to raise the new.

You will become a great version of yourself rather than a mediocre version of someone else .

All of this has been your design.

He feels deeply peaceful, serene almost, even though he knows it's wrong to be so – to feel so calm after what he's done – and it's then that Will wonders if he's dying. He possibly ought to be, cut up and carved apart as he has been…and yet he feels so entirely alive. Then he closes his eyes again because he's not yet finished and the time has come to turn over the coin and examine what's on the other side.

So he finally begins to think about Hannibal instead of himself. He thinks about his face, his voice, the way he moves, how it feels to be touched by him: how so much that is peerless and flawless exists to compete with the disturbing and degenerate. Both a protagonist *and* antagonist, who wanted to protect Will from himself and aspired to help him reach a potential that most people could never bring themselves to sanction, or even to comprehend. The Byronic anti-hero, mad, bad and dangerous to know: the hyperintelligent outcast who strolls around humanity and is in love with it and fascinated by it, but never really *part* of it. Sadistic yet virtuosic, rejecting all conventions, demolishing life on a whim and elevating death into art, yet still retaining a preternatural level of magnetism and attraction in spite of it all that surpasses Will's reason and reservation. Then he remembers that stricken night when he laid in Hannibal's arms and confided his increasing sense of dread. The way he'd likened himself to the Sultan in the folktale who waited for the world to cave in: the helplessness, uncertainty and perceived lack of a choice. *There are no right or wrong choices,* Hannibal had replied. *Not for people like us. It is not merely a question of true or false, correct or incorrect: the road less travelled or the path not taken. None of the usual rules apply. We simply make our choice and after we have made it, we make it into the right one.*

In that moment, and without even looking, Will has a sudden sense that Hannibal is close to him and when he opens his eyes it's to see him leaning down, offering a hand to help pull Will to his feet. He's covered in blood, just as Will is: they're both drenched in it. "It really does look black in the moonlight," says Will, and his voice sounds very far away. Then he reaches out blindly with both arms: moving forward until he's being enveloped and held close, a single sharp cheekbone stroking against his hair like the comfort of cradling hands.

"See," replies Hannibal quietly. "This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us."

Will waits a few seconds before he replies. He can feel a tear starting to run down his face: a last streak of purity amidst all the blood. "It's beautiful," he hears himself saying, and he knows that he means it.

Hannibal doesn't add anything else, but his arms are still holding Will close; and they stay like that for a while as the water rushes below and the moon glimmers above: Will trembling slightly and Hannibal stroking his shoulders and rhythmically moving his face against his hair. And it's there, stranded in the middle of the moonlight and the streaming black blood, that Will has a clear sense of how Hannibal has finally, *finally* got what he always wanted – a joint hunt, a shared kill, and then Will in his arms at the end of it all. Yet while they're stood so close to the edge of the dock he's making no attempt to steer them away. There's no doubt he knows that Will could lunge for him: knows that Will has every reason to tip them into that pounding, cascading expanse of black water below. Yet he's making no effort to take himself to safety. It's as if he'd be peacefully content to die like this. Just stood here, just like this. Stood here with Will in his arms…having finally got what he always wanted.

And even Will, with all his imagination and all his empathy, finds it impossible to envisage a greater show of devotion than the way Hannibal is simply standing there, calmly prepared to face death itself, if it only means the chance to have Will in his arms for a little longer – quietly curled up against his chest in a bloody embrace like a piece of himself that was broken away and after endless patient waiting has finally been restored.

Will knows that it doesn't really make sense. It's not the 'right' way…it's not how these things are supposed to happen. Human reason revolts at it and human laws forbid it, because it's like if love was set on fire then fused together: something forged in pain and incomprehension then kindled with beauty and horror and set and sealed with a wild, wild longing. Something fervent, infernal and unknowable: something that doesn't belong to real life. And yet, and yet…at the same time something so deeply human, the sort of thing that could happen to anybody. The sort of thing that happens everyday: just two people who needed to find each other because they couldn't be complete in any other way. One person with no empathy and one with too much. One person who needed guidance and one who yearned for someone to guide. One volatile and unpredictable the other cold, curious, and impersonal. The destructive opposites: the empath and the sociopath, the hunter and the hunted, the unstoppable force and the immovable object. But still just two people behind it all; just two frail and fallible human beings.

Will's head is tucked beneath Hannibal's chin now, and from where he's stood he can hear his heartbeat. Strange that this is the organ most closely linked to love – there must be a reason for it but Will doesn't know what it is. It's just a mass of tissue after all. Ingenious and

tireless and perfectly constructed, but still just insensate flesh for all that. Valves and atriums, ventricles and fine blue veins; what is it about such a collection that can possibly signify love? And yet it does, even though there's no way to make a heart give up its confidences. No way to fully understand why it yearns and pulses in the way it does. Anatomical. Metaphysical. Something material yet so intangible that even the sharpest scalpel and surest hands in all the world can't truly prise it apart and know it. Because there isn't, is there? No way to splice it up and examine it; even Hannibal couldn't dissect that…The anatomy of a love story.

Chapter End Notes

Hey Victorian Fannibals, I have a favour to ask. I'm not reading Hannigram at the moment (I shall binge massively at some point, but am currently trying to avoid being overly influenced – or, tbh, intimidated! – by what other people are doing) and so have no idea what fandom protocol is around writing violence. Would you recommend I put an Archive Warning on the fic or do you think the current chapter warnings and 'canon-typical violence' tag is enough?

On a more cheerful note, we don't need to worry that The Sad Orphan Bullshit Face is getting lonely all by itself because courtesy of the very wonderful and talented graham_cracker there's now a lovely gifset of the Mongoose to keep it company :-D (btw I know some people have had problems following the links, so let me know if so and I'll re-post as this generally seems to fix it).

Huge thanks also to Magical_Destiny, Paperwhite_Narcissus and WhenasInSilks whose reflections and insights on the past few updates gave me several sources of inspiration for writing the final scene in this chapter.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

ETA May '17

I'm happy to say that courtesy of the one and only ElectraRhodes, Victorian Sassy Science now have their own spin-off fic! This is brilliant and highly recommended.

ETA Jan 2018

...And now there's a podfic courtesy of the lovely Aleandri who had the talent and stamina to read this monster out loud, and which you can enjoy here if you'd like to :-)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring is finally coming to London. Everyone knows it and you hardly need a calendar to tell you so because it's there in the strength of the sun and the billowy white clouds and the air's damp freshness as the fog slinks away. It's there in the chattering birdsong of the mornings and in the warm tinge of the evenings and most of all it's in the gathering specks of colour that were absent before but are multiplying daily now in the same way as the bright buds on the trees: a soft blue glow in the sky, a blooming pink in peoples' complexions as scarves and mufflers are gradually discarded and in the triumphant smattering of cream and violet from the crocuses in Regents Park that are beginning to march across the banksides as a lingering invitation for summer. It's the kind of day that invites good humour and even Will finds it difficult not to smile despite the way it hurts the damaged muscles in his face. Having finally been deemed recovered by the police surgeon it's actually the first time he's ventured out in several weeks, and his legs feel frail and unfamiliar with lack of use in the manner of a new-born foal. The frenetically bustling streets are hardly accommodating to such fragility and it means he needs to keep ducking out the way of the crowds and stopping at intervals to lean against walls and lampposts, but he persists regardless because the day might be pleasant but it's also a busy one and there's a lot to be accomplished. In two weeks' time, he goes back to America.

As he crosses Blackfriars Bridge Will spares a few glances for the foamy surface of the Thames and fantasises that it's staring back at him, perceptive yet secretive with the unspoken recognition of what it witnessed that one extraordinary night. Nearby there's a woman selling bunches of daffodils in a little basket and their smiling yellow faces catch Will's eye as he walks past and make him wonder if he ought to buy some for where he's going. The idea is rather appealing, not least because it doesn't feel entirely right to arrive at his destination empty-handed, but he's also concerned that flowers have a romantic overtone which might prove painful for their recipient and so finally decides against it. Better to have

brought *something* though, and he reproaches himself for not having thought of it before. But it's too late now if he wants to arrive at his appointment on time, so he regretfully turns his back on the flower seller and heads down Victoria Road instead where he locates the right house without any trouble and taps briskly on the door. The knocker is of a similar wrought iron design to the one in Harley Street and for a few seconds the memory of arriving there for the first time is so vivid he can almost see himself re-enacting the scene: the way he'd stood on the step impatiently shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Mary's incomprehension at his accent, and the way the low, distinctive voice had suddenly appeared from the darkness of the hallway. "*So, Inspector Will Graham. What a very fateful coincidence…*" In his mind's eye Will looks much younger than he does now, even though it's not all that long ago, and he can't decide whether he wants to pull this other version close to comfort and console it, or grab it by the shoulders and shake some sense into it instead; and then the door is being opened and there's no time to think about it anymore because he's being greeted by a gently smiling maidservant with glossy red hair piled up beneath a starched white cap who's watching him with frank curiosity and brightly inquisitive eyes. So Will announces who he is and that he's expected, and the maid stands aside and welcomes him in with her velvety Irish accent – and which is how he finds himself sat in an embroidered armchair drinking tea in a neatly attractive parlour that forms the front room of a neatly attractive house that commands a stunningly scenic view of St Paul's Cathedral. It doesn't take long for the neatness and attractiveness of the house and the scenic qualities of the view to strike Will as highly fitting and suitable for the occupant, despite the fact she's unable to fully appreciate their charms on the grounds of being unable to see them. But he's still glad she has them all the same.

In many ways it's strange to be in her presence – no longer an inanimate prop in a criminal profile but a living breathing woman with thoughts and feelings and a decided opinion of her own. He finally finds out her name: Reba ("It's short for Rebecca," she says, "it was my grandmother's name"), and that she's 23 years old and has lived sightlessly in London for all of them. Will, whose only previous experience of the blind has been as the subject of charitable appeals and patronising 'there but for the grace of God' homilies, is quietly admiring of how independent and dignified she is although remains reluctant to express it from an instinctive sense that his admiration is neither wanted nor required. Her purpose in life isn't to be an inspiration to him or anyone else after all; and after talking to her for some time he becomes increasingly aware that her strength and integrity are derived from what she says and does and the person she is, not some sort of martyred by-product of being unable to see. So when she finally puts down her cup and says "I should have seen it" in a voice that's grieving and tremulous, yet quietly courageous in spite of it all, he understands exactly what she means.

In fact they hadn't discussed Dolarhyde at all to begin with; and which as omissions go was a particularly striking one considering he was the sole reason for Will's visit and in many ways was there with them the entire time anyway, his presence so looming and pronounced he might as well have been sat between them on one of the meticulously embroidered chairs… sat there with his throat ripped open and his stomach sliced apart. Of course she already knew what had happened – or at least as much as anyone knew – because Jack Crawford had come to see her when a visiting card with her name and address were found in Dolarhyde's pocket. In this respect Jack must have been honing up his visiting skills in the past few weeks because he'd come to see Will too, perched anxiously at the side of the bed the whole time

with his fingers knotted together and his features creased in concern while Will stared at the ceiling and waited for the torn skin and ruptured muscles to painstakingly knit themselves back together. These visits always began with Jack gruff and hearty and ended with him being mournful and apprehensive, frequently patting Will's hand in a tentative and cautious way as if he feared the slightest contact might cause Will to shatter into even finer fragments than he already was. He'd brought Will books and tonic wine and get well wishes from everyone at Scotland Yard – even, on one occasion, a jigsaw puzzle and a tin of English sweets – but never anything so incendiary as a visiting card from the pocket of Jack the Ripper; and as Will glances down he realises he can actually see it now from where it's lying on the coffee table, flinching slightly at what looks like a smear of blood on the corner before recognising that it's just a printed picture of a rose. It must have been there since Jack Crawford's visit and Will finds it easy to imagine him gingerly laying it in place with his usual clumsy kindness, unsure of the best thing to say or do (no doubt with knotted fingers and an anxiously creased face) and wonders whether Reba even knows it's there? Most people might assume that she can't possibly know because if she did it would have been destroyed, but Will understands that regardless of what common sense and logic, or even sense and feeling dictate, that's it rarely always easy to simply let go. Your heart betrays you, and your mind likewise; you can't simply slice the yearning away and cast it aside…not even if you want to.

"I should have seen it," Reba is now repeating, and her tone is increasingly strained. "I should have known."

Will shifts in his chair, hesitating slightly before he responds. "Sometimes you can't," he says quietly. "Trust me. I've been there myself."

"I've always been wary of people who foster dependency and feed on it," continues Reba, as if he hasn't spoken. "I've had to be; the blind attract them." She rubs her hand across her face and Will blinks a few times, almost imperceptibly: *not just the blind*. "Instead I drew a maniac," she adds and the bitterness and self-blame are palpable, burning in her voice like flares. An unhappy silence follows and Will bites his lower lip with sympathy, hesitating a few more seconds before slowly reaching out and placing his hand over hers. He can't take it away – he knows he can't; can't undo what's been done – but he's suddenly determined that if the visit achieves nothing else, he won't allow himself to leave while she still believes this. It's a better gift than flowers after all.

"There was a lot wrong with Dolarhyde," he says gently, "but there's nothing wrong with you." As she glances up, pale and expectant, he briefly tightens his grip on her hand. "Let me tell you something Miss McClane. For *weeks* we were out in Whitechapel looking for him; weeks and weeks at a time with nothing happening, and nobody could understand why. Then one night it hit me; I said it to one of my colleagues: '*It might be that there's someone in his life and he – or she – is acting as a deterrent*.' And there was wasn't there: you. Whatever was left in him that was still human was being kept alive because of the effect you had on him. You undoubtedly saved some lives."

Reba gives Will a small smile – faint and tremulous but definitely there – then dabs at her cheek with a scrap of lace handkerchief. Her eyes are extremely beautiful: large, dark and

shiny as sloes. “Francis hurt you very badly didn’t he?” she says after another short pause. “Superintendent Crawford told me what happened; he nearly killed you.”

“He tried pretty hard, yes.”

“So how are you now?”

Once again Will finds himself unable to respond immediately. “Getting there, I think,” he says eventually. “You know how it is. Hopefully one day I’ll get all the way.”

“I hope so too,” says Reba, and she returns the pressure on his hand. “You seem like a good man, Mr Graham.”

Will gives a small smile of his own at this. “Thank you,” he replies quietly. “In some ways I guess I am.” And maybe he is – in some ways – although undoubtedly not in others. Yet how reassuring to know that someone has been able to see it regardless; that even to the blind, it’s still there to see. Just as he’s always been in fact: the laureate of a double life. ‘*Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast…’* Then he glances down and the sight of the visiting card overwhelms him with sympathy all over again because he understands so well that the person she gave it to wasn’t a Great Red Dragon with snarled teeth and crazed yellowish eyes but rather Francis Dolarhyde, a modest hospital attendant from Whitechapel, who held her hand and took her to art galleries and no doubt endeavoured to make himself useful and amenable. This realisation leads in turn to another one, and in the morass of misery and uncertainty he gratefully seizes on it as a tangible offering: something to thrust into the slim pale hands in the same manner as the flowers that he never brought her. “I couldn’t help noticing all the books,” he says now. “You have someone who comes to read to you?”

“Yes, a neighbour’s son sits with me twice a week. I go to lectures too,” she falters, suddenly appearing stricken. “At least I did. I’m not sure now – Francis used to take me, but…”

Will nods privately to himself, the suspicion having been confirmed. “If you’d like someone new to go with – I mean, if you’d like to meet a new group of friends entirely – I might be able to help,” he says gently. “I could introduce you to a very nice woman. Her name’s Alana Bloom; I think you’d get along very well.”

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“So – Mr Graham,” says Jack. “Will.” There’s a pause as he tests how the unfamiliar syllable feels in his mouth, chewing on it for a few seconds like someone trying a strange food for the first time. “*Will*. Finally on the mend I see.”

“Sir.”

“And Dr Lecter?” Jack raises his eyebrows expectantly then promptly sweeps on before Will can respond. “I hear he’s making a good recovery too. Apparently the bullet missed the major organs.”

“It did, yes.”

“Damned lucky.”

“Extremely lucky.”

“Apparently they operated on him at Saint Bartholomew’s. A lot of new procedures being developed in the infirmary there – Jim Price is always writing monographs about it.”

“I know sir.”

“I must admit that if I were a medical man I wouldn’t fancy Dr Lecter as a patient,” adds Jack, attempting levity. “No doubt he spent the entire time complaining that they wouldn’t let him take the bullet out himself.”

“Yes sir, no doubt.”

“I can just imagine that commanding voice ordering all the surgeons around from the top of the operating table.” Jack gives a bark of laughter then finally clears his throat and looks serious, having obviously employed enough distracting humour to build himself up to what he wanted to express all along: an earnest display of emotion. “Nevertheless Mr Graham – Will – I’m extremely glad that the two of you didn’t…well. You know. Very glad indeed.”

“Thank you sir,” says Will, who’s mentally rehearsing calling him ‘Jack’ in return and finding the whole enterprise rather impossible. “Me too.”

“It’s the damndest thing I ever saw,” adds Jack shaking his head. “Francis Dolarhyde. Who would have guessed?” He pauses, then catches Will’s eye and has the grace to add: “Except for you of course.”

“It’s all right sir, you did what you could; and if I’d worked it out a few hours earlier we could have just gone straight to the hospital and picked him up.” He shrugs, typically modest. “Besides, I know how farfetched it all sounded.”

“We finally found his home you know,” Jack continues gloomily. “Right opposite the Whitechapel Hospital, just like you said it would be. *Awful* place but there was nothing there. No evidence at all. He’d cleared out completely; must have known the game was up when we visited the mortuary that second time.” He shakes his head again, obviously nonplussed by the enormity of it all. “We’ll never be able to prove a thing – no way to formally link it to him. The Ripper case will go down in history as unsolved.”

“But the murders will stop. I think we can still call that a good result.”

Jack scowls again, suddenly mulish. “You should have got worldwide publicity for what you did. And the Yard too.”

“I don’t care about that,” replies Will firmly. “Anyway, I hate publicity.”

“Even so…” says Jack in a fretful tone, then sees the determined look on Will’s face and obligingly drops the subject. “You must be pretty excited to be going home. When do you leave?”

“About a fortnight’s time.”

“I don’t suppose I can convince you to stay?” adds Jack hopefully. “We’d be happy to find a place for you here permanently; *more* than happy. In fact you could name your own terms, whatever you like.”

“Thank you sir. I appreciate that, I really do, but I want to go home. Back to the States. There – there are too many ghosts here. I need a fresh start.”

“How is that a fresh start?” demands Jack. “You’re going back to the same place you started from.”

But with a new version of myself, thinks Will with silent sincerity, although he knows there’s no possible way to explain it that Jack could understand so simply shrugs instead. “I’m sorry sir but my mind’s made up.”

“Well if your mind’s made up,” says Jack with obvious regret, “then I don’t suppose there’s anything I can do.” He briefly looks forlorn before suddenly brightening again. “Anyway, I might well end up seeing you again before too long. Commissioner Purnell’s been asking me to visit him for years; I could come and say hello.”

Will can’t help smiling at this. “Oh yes, of course. I keep forgetting that you’re old friends.”

“How could you forget? It’s the only reason you’re here in the first place.”

“I know, but it’s hard to imagine you as friends.” Jack raises his eyebrows. “Because he’s so…” Jack’s eyebrows promptly start to descend again. “And you’re so…” Jack’s eyebrows begin in furrow, like two large hairy caterpillars converging across his forehead and Will eventually gives up and blurts out the shorter and more tactful version instead: “I like you a lot better than I like him. Sir.”

Jack grins at that, for a few moments looking positively boyish. “Well thank you Will. I appreciate that very much.”

“It’s fine,” replies Will. “It’s true, anyway.” Jack grins again and then actually lunges across his desk to give Will a clumsy approximation of a hug; and which Will returns for want of anything better to do before they both start to get awkward at exactly the same time and promptly sit down again and begin clearing their throats at each other in a hyper-masculine sort of way. “We’ll have to throw you a leaving party of course,” adds Jack. “The whole Yard will want to come and shake your hand.”

Will opens his mouth then lets it fall closed again, convinced he might actually have gone pale with horror at this appalling image. “Thank you sir but I’d rather not.”

“Don’t be ridiculous son, of course you would.”

“No – no, I really wouldn’t.”

“We’re throwing you a farewell party,” says Jack firmly. “You can’t possibly go back to America without one.”

“Why?” demands Will, whose voice has practically risen to a shriek.

Jack leans a bit further back in his chair and darts Will a distinctly smug look. *Why?* the look says. *I’ll tell you why. Because I’m goddamn Jack Crawford and you’re not – suck it up little man*. “You’ll enjoy it,” says Jack cheerfully.

At this point Will sensibly decides to admit defeat while consoling himself with the idea that one of the stab wounds can be arranged to have a convenient relapse the day before this torturous ceremony is due to take place. “Thank you sir,” he says instead, trying to sound sincere.

“Don’t mention it,” replies Jack, reaching across the desk again to give Will a pat on the hand. “It’s the least you deserve after what you’ve done.”

Will smiles rather awkwardly then clears his throat again, Jack beaming at him approvingly the entire time. “Well, I should really get going now sir.” Jack continues to beam. “There’s a still a lot to arrange for the voyage back.”

“Yes of course,” replies Jack, waving his hands around in elaborate circles like a conjurer. “Off you go.”

Will nods gratefully then gets to his feet before suddenly pausing in fastening his coat. “Before I do – I don’t suppose Dr Price or Mr Zeller are around?”

“They should be in the office. Not intending to say goodbye are you? You’ll see them at the party.”

“Yes,” says Will carefully. “Yes, I *know*, but…but I wanted to ask them something in the meantime.”

“Well I’m sure they’ll be pleased to see you,” replies Jack, pushing back his chair and standing up so he can give Will a clap on the shoulder that’s so vigorous it nearly sends him flying. “You’re a marvel son, a real marvel. I don’t mind saying so.”

“Thank you sir,” replies Will. He can feel a pang of emotion that’s almost painful in its intensity – a pungent blend of remorse, sadness, guilt and relief that’s enough to make his eyes sting – and in order to escape it he ducks out of Jack’s office and heads into the main investigation room instead, where he finds Price and Zeller propped against a desk and industriously rifling through the usual piles of paperwork.

“Mr Graham!” yells Price. “What a pleasure! Have some of this coffee won’t you, it’s from Fortnum’s and very fine. No, not you Mr Zeller; minion grade coffee for you, I’m afraid, unless you finish those reports for me by this afternoon. *Delightful* to see you Mr Graham – and far less wrecked than I expected. In fact that scar actually looks rather well on you. It lends a certain distinction; makes you look formidable.” He gives Will the ghost of a wink. “You’ll finally be able to get rid of that beard; nobody’s going to refer to you as ‘boyish’ ever again now you’ve got that splendid specimen on your face. But what’s this I hear about you leaving us?”

“It’s true I’m afraid. I’m going back to America.”

“Well *honestly*,” says Price. “What a heartless young man you are Mr Graham – running out on us so soon just because you prefer the company of…” He snaps his fingers, obviously trying to think of something quintessentially American; Zeller and Will put their hands in their pockets and wait patiently. “Of *bald eagles* rather than us,” says Price triumphantly, before lowering his voice and suddenly looking more serious. “Not that I can blame you of course. You’ve had a terrible time: being so ill, nearly getting locked in Dr Chilton’s asylum, that business with Freddy Lounds – and now *this*.” Price sighs sympathetically then pats Will on the shoulder. “Rest assured Mr Graham that while the circumstances might prevent widespread recognition of what you did, you can guarantee that none of us shall ever forget it.”

“Thank you,” says Will quietly. “That means a lot to me.”

“And perhaps Mr Zeller and I might come and visit you at some point,” adds Price, promptly reverting to his former, more light hearted mood. “I’ve always wanted to see America. The medico-legal advancements over there are quite remarkable.”

“And what does Mr Zeller think about seeing it?” asks Will with a small smile.

“Oh, he’ll come if I do,” says Price airily before Zeller can reply. “In fact you might well get the Superintendent too – a little Scotland Yard reunion.”

“Yes he mentioned that.”

“Commissioner Purnell’s been badgering him to come over for years from what I hear, so it’s not as unlikely as it sounds.” Price hesitates then suddenly looks sly. “He may even bring the new Mrs Crawford.”

“You what?” exclaims Will.

“Be so good as to not choke on my Fortnum’s coffee,” says Price. “Mr Zeller, give Mr Graham your minion grade coffee so he can choke on that instead.”

“It’s true,” announces Zeller triumphantly. “Mr Crawford is having a secret romance with the landlady at *The Ten Bells.”*

“*Really?*” asks Will. He pauses for a few seconds, casting his mind back to the night of the alleyway attack until he thinks he can dimly remember her: a buxom handsome woman in her late thirties, bringing up a bowl of hot water so Price could clean the blood from his face. “Well, good for Mr Crawford,” he adds in a rather wondering tone of voice.

“Think of all that free beer,” says Zeller longingly.

“Yes, they were somewhat thrown together after that night you got knocked on the head,” continues Price. “Mr Crawford was there all the time taking witness statements and it would seem that nature took its course thereafter. You can add matchmaking to your existing list of talents Mr Graham. Perhaps they’ll name their first child after you. Mind you,” he lowers his

voice and gives a rather mischievous grin. “Mr Crawford had to compete for the lady’s favours. It appears he had a bit of competition.”

“One of the salesmen from the brewery,” says Zeller. “He’d had his eye on her for ages and was terribly jealous. He confronted Mr Crawford one night and tried to kick him in…” He looks like he’s struggling not to laugh and Will raises his eyebrows expectantly. “In the *balls*.”

“Well you can hardly blame him,” says Price complacently. “They are man’s greatest design flaw after all – in fact someone ought to write to Mr Darwin and insist he points this out *very* clearly in his next book. Needless to say neither Mr Crawford nor his respective design flaws took it particularly well. He boxed the man’s ears for him as if he were a naughty schoolboy – it was really rather splendid. Of course they do say the path of true love never does run smooth.”

Will smiles again, rather more forlornly this time. “No, I guess it doesn’t.”

“At any rate this is all a very convoluted way of saying that Mr Crawford may well have an added incentive to whisk the delectable Mrs Crawford away from London where her numerous East End admirers shall no longer be able to pine over her. Although even if he doesn’t you can depend on myself and Mr Zeller, because I am quite determined to visit the Johns Hopkins Medical School.”

“That would be really great,” says Will, meaning it.

“It could be a whole new chapter for us all,” says Price rather dreamily. “Imagine that; all of us working together again. Like The Three Musketeers. Mr Graham can be the young dashing one and Mr Zeller can be the drunken one…although admittedly that leaves me as the foolish corpulent one, so actually we’re nothing like The Three Musketeers at all. Not that there isn’t plenty to be done here in the meantime of course. Mr Zeller, fetch me a pen and paper would you? I need to correspond with Mr Darwin about man’s greatest design flaw.”

Zeller rolls his eyes then notices Will beginning to gather up his coat and leans over to put a hand on his shoulder. “Off already?” he asks, and Will is touched to detect the obvious note of disappointment in his voice. “You’ve only just arrived.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I’ll try and stop by again next week. I would’ve liked to stay longer, but… places to be.”

“Then I suppose we must bid you a temporary farewell,” says Price, shaking Will heartily by the hand then standing aside to give Zeller room to do the same. “You must be terribly busy arranging your journey.”

“Yeah, there’s still a lot to be done.”

“And where are you off to now?”

Will hesitates a few seconds and then resumes fastening his coat. “Hampstead Heath,” he replies, not quite looking Price in the eye. “There’s someone I have to meet.”

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The panorama is still just as breathtaking as the first time Will saw it and it’s actually something of a relief to realise that he’s not grown so jaded and cynical as to be impervious to beauty: spread before him as it is in this heady eyrie above the city heights in the form of domes and spires and wharves and warehouses, sprinklings of rosy red brick amidst blue-grey slates and golden limestone and all woven throughout by the glitter of the Thames in its inexorable rush to the sea. It’s really not the right weather to be up here, being still too cool and damp, but Will was determined to see it again before going home and was concerned he might not have another opportunity. Yet there’s also no denying that of all the locations London has to offer, it’s impossible to devise a more perfect setting than this for the conversation he knows he needs to have. Next to him, as if reading his thoughts, he can feel Hannibal reaching out for his hand and after a slight hesitation Will returns the pressure, allowing their fingers to entwine together as a silence stretches out that’s full of yearning and unspoken admission, yet calmly companionate despite it.

“I’m still angry with you,” says Will finally. “Just so you know.” Shifting slightly he cups his chin in his palm then gazes fixedly into the horizon as if searching out whatever it is that might be waiting for him there. “I’ll probably be angry for a very long time.”

“I suppose you have every right to be.”

“You could at least *try* and sound sincere,” says Will irritably.

“I am sincere – partly. I’m sorry you feel the way you do; I’m not sorry about the outcome.”

“So in other words you’re not sorry at all.”

“Why should I be?” asks Hannibal calmly. “Guilt is indulgent and self-serving.”

“At least when applied to yourself. Convenient that.”

“I don’t wish to have any more discussions about guilt,” says Hannibal, tucking a strand of Will’s hair behind his ear from where the wind is blowing it. “I’ve agreed to sit on a patch of wet grass with you haven’t I? What greater display of penance can you possibly require?”

“Well it seemed like a good place,” replies Will with a faint smile. He wants to add ‘*this is where I first started falling in love with you*,’ but can’t find a way of doing it that won’t feel impossibly maudlin and self-conscious. “Fitting.”

“It is,” agrees Hannibal. “I can’t fault your judgement there.”

Will smiles again then takes hold of a few stems of celandine – bravely struggling through the thin soil as the first heralds of spring – and absent-mindedly begins to twine the ends together. “Those people over there are staring at us.”

“Of course they are. We look incredibly disreputable. You especially; you have quite clearly been in a fight.”

“Hmmm.”

“A knife fight,” continues Hannibal, thoughtfully trailing a fingertip around the edges of Will’s scar. “They probably think you’re a criminal of some kind. Although needless to say you still look exceptionally beautiful; I’m not entirely sure how you manage it.”

“Dr Price thinks it makes me look formidable.”

“And I agree with Dr Price, with the exception that you didn’t require a scar to appear so given that you always were. And when the occasion demanded it, you were *magnificent.*” Hannibal pauses a few seconds then adds with a hint of smugness: “I knew you would be.”

“And you were *shameless*,” says Will firmly. “You were never as badly injured as you made out were you? You were faking it the whole time.”

“That statement is missing the proviso of ‘successfully.’ I intended to lull him into a false sense of security and I accomplished exactly that.”

“Yeah, nice try, but you know full well that wasn’t the only reason. You were curious to see what I’d do.”

“Naturally.”

“And what I would feel,” adds Will pointedly. “You wanted me to panic that you were going to die.”

Hannibal leans back, still poised and elegant despite being obliged to sit on the ground, and casts Will a slow look from the corner of his eye. “Yes – and again we see that I was entirely successful.”

“Oh God,” says Will, suddenly overcome with a deranged urge to start laughing. “You’re so manipulative. You just can’t help yourself can you?”

“Evidently not,” replies Hannibal with the very faintest flicker of a smirk. “Although I was hardly feigning the entire thing: he did shoot me, after all.”

“I should shoot you again myself. In the *head*.”

“Yes, I suppose you would be perfectly capable. What extreme lengths you will go to in order to prove your point.” Hannibal reaches out again to smooth Will’s hair back, then instead of removing his hand leaves it where it is so he can cup Will’s face in his palm. “Just as I endeavoured to prove mine. *Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, And one is striving to forsake its brother*. And see how it destroyed him in the end? No one is going to destroy *you*. More to the point, you are no longer likely to destroy yourself.”

“If you’re expecting me to *thank* you…”

“No,” replies Hannibal calmly. “I may have facilitated at certain points…” Will makes a contemptuous snorting sound and Hannibal smiles again and begins to stroke the edge of Will’s cheekbone with his thumb. “I may have facilitated but the true architect of this particular structure – of this *artwork* – is you.”

“*Facilitated*,” repeats Will, who despite his sarcastic tone has still started to lean into Hannibal’s touch. “You mean like trying to frame me for killing someone – just to pick one example. I mean, seriously. What if I’d ended up getting arrested for it?”

“Then you would have gone to prison I suppose,” replies Hannibal in a leisurely way. “Don’t look so furious; no doubt I would have discovered I missed you in your absence and contrived a way to get you out again.”

“No doubt,” says Will sarcastically.

“No doubt at all. I would have become horribly bored without you materializing in my consulting room at all hours to be rude to me. Besides, even if you had gone to prison you would certainly have managed to turn such a situation to your advantage. In that respect I’m actually rather sorry you didn’t, because it would have been so fascinating to see what emerged afterwards. You do, after all, typify the wisdom of ‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.’”

“What doesn’t kill *me*,” replies Will, “had better apologise and then run for its goddamn life. So go on old man – get moving.”

“Such things you say to me,” sighs Hannibal in an exaggeratedly martyred tone.

“It’s the *least* of what you deserve so I advise you to get used to it. And speaking of framing, what about Dr Chilton?”

“What about him? He is most likely going to be committed within his own institution.” Hannibal pauses then smiles rather malevolently. “Or if he is very lucky they shall simply hang him instead.”

“You should write anonymously. Give them information only the real culprit would know.”

“Of course I should,” replies Hannibal leisurely. “Although I'm afraid I have no intention of doing anything of the kind. Oh, I see – it offends your sense of justice doesn’t it? Don’t trouble yourself on Frederick Chilton’s account Will. It may well be that he can alibi himself for some of the crimes and the case will be thrown out of court.” The malevolent smile briefly reappears. “Or maybe it won’t. Besides he is hardly my priority at the moment. Bedelia, for example, has not acquitted herself particularly creditably. You and I should pay her a visit…perhaps invite her for dinner.”

Will rolls his eyes. “She’s hardly my priority either. There’s still so much to get organised.”

“Very true.”

“So how do you think you’re going to like living in America?”

“I’m not sure yet,” replies Hannibal thoughtfully. “My liking for America itself is undetermined. The one certainty, on the other hand, is the presence of yourself; and as long as you were there too then I believe I would be content wherever I was. Although I’m not going to discover it immediately am I? Remember your promise; you are to allow me to take you to Europe first. I want to show you Italy, France, Prussia…” Hannibal trails off, suddenly looking rather dreamy. “There is so much I would like to show you Will.”

“Yes. I want to see it too.”

“Although primarily you simply wish to leave,” adds Hannibal with typical acuteness. “London tires you now doesn’t it?”

“Can you blame me? There are so many bad associations.”

“And yet what a legacy you entrust as you walk away. In that respect you’re hardly leaving London as you found her.”

“I know,” says Will, briefly rather awed as he’s struck all over again by the enormity of the whole thing. “We really did get him.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” replies Hannibal, who doesn't seem particularly concerned about it one way or the other. “At least until the next one comes along – which shall no doubt be sooner rather than later.”

“Optimistic aren't you.”

“Merely realistic. Because of course there will be others.”

“Of course.”

“And in America too,” adds Hannibal with another long, pointed stare. “In that respect you still intend to return to the police force?”

“Yes,” says Will slowly. “Or at least to begin with. I mean I’m *good* at it; and I need to earn a living somehow.” He falls silent again, mulling over his defiant impressions that time in the tailor’s: the pride of independence and his refusal to ever become financially reliant on someone else. Not of course that this is the only reason, or – if he’s completely honest with himself – even the most compelling one. “It would also make me more *aware* of certain people,” he finally adds. “People who deserved my…attention.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately, and when he does there’s a slight edge to his voice. “That’s rather quaint Will; you see yourself as some sort of vigilante then? And I suppose you’re envisaging me in the same way.”

At one time Will would have found the flicker of menace unnerving but now he simply leans back and regards Hannibal appraisingly without any trace of fear. “It’s up to you how you construct yourself,” he replies, calm yet firm. “Although I would’ve thought you’d find it more satisfying to go after people who present a bigger challenge than opera patrons and hotel ostlers.” Remembering Price’s earlier reference to Darwin he briefly struggles not to

smile. “That’s the design for apex predators after all. But my own criteria are non-negotiable: it has to be someone who deserves it. It has to be *justified*; not because they’ve failed some arbitrary standards of worthiness.”

“My standards of worthiness,” replies Hannibal crisply, “are not *arbitrary*.”

“Then it has to be a standard I’d agree with,” snaps back Will. “Because what you said before – you were wrong. I’m not like you Hannibal. I never have been.”

“No?” says Hannibal, low and intense. “And yet somehow so *very* alike in spite of it.”

His eyes have begun to narrow in the unsettling way that’s clearly recognisable from previous confrontations, yet Will still refuses to be intimidated and rather than reply straight away sifts the question over in his head instead, taking the time to give it proper consideration. “Perhaps,” he says eventually; and he finally turns around so he can look Hannibal directly in the eye. “Like two sides of the same coin: people say that don’t they? When separate things are similar…‘*two sides of the same coin’*. But it still doesn’t mean perfect proportion because no coin is ever identical on both sides. I’m not staying with you as an acolyte for you to try and model in your own image Hannibal – you need to understand that. I stay with you as an equal or I don’t stay at all.”

Hannibal’s mouth flickers into a faint smile and Will stares back intently, almost as if he’s trying to memorise the cast and contour of each angular feature as he begins to reconstruct their conversation from all that time ago. Hannibal quoting Michelangelo in regards to creation, the virtues of patience and vision and the necessity of waiting: “*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free*.” The way he’d trailed his fingers over Will’s face as they’d both reflected on transformation, emergence and the process of becoming. “*For the sculptor seeks artistry,”* Hannibal had said, *“and beauty – and so acquits himself tirelessly on his creation’s behalf. It would be far easier for him to simply strike the marble to smithereens, to destroy it; but he does not. His compassion becomes inconvenient. His life, his liberty, the performance of his philosophy: all subsumed in his creation’s interests, simply because its’ potential to flourish and prosper within the world grows more dear to him than his own*.”

And how cruelty requires empathy…perhaps that more than anything else. “*Of course the change may be painful,”* Hannibal had concluded, lying so still with Will in his arms as the sun began to rise behind them and stain the sky the same scarlet as blood. *“Who is to say that the marble doesn’t suffer through the sculptor’s endeavours? Even though each blow is inflicted from a place of tenderness and creativity*.”

And now – here they are. Even though every rational thought and imperative dictates that they should be pretty much anywhere else. So Will lets out a long breath he hadn’t even realised he’d been holding just as Hannibal moves forward again to renew the gentle stroking motion along his cheek. “I honestly don’t know what’s going to happen,” says Will quietly. “What I need from you, what you need from me, what we’ll end up doing together…we’re going to have to figure it out as we go along. But one thing I *do* know.” Darting out a hand he seizes hold of Hannibal’s wrist from where it’s resting against his face; and while the grip is hard enough to hurt Hannibal doesn’t flinch and fails to pull away, seemingly content to tolerate whatever it is Will feels the need to administer. “I’m serious Hannibal,” says Will, his voice low and intense. “If you *ever* do anything like that to me again…”

He pauses ominously and Hannibal gives a faint nod in return. “It’s all right,” he replies. “I know what you’re going to say – and that you don’t intend to begin haranguing or threatening to kill me, because you understand, sadistic boy that you are, that you can warn me off with something even more severe.”

Will stares back, cool and appraising. “Which is what?”

Hannibal’s eyes briefly assume their yearning far-away expression before the moment has passed and the look has gone, and he curls his palm round the back of Will’s head and pulls him forward so he can gently brush his lips against his forehead. “You know perfectly well,” he murmurs against his skin. “To find a way to leave.”

*****

Over in the west the sun is beginning to set, slowly turning the horizon from pale blue to shades of buttery gold and pomegranate pink with a sprinkling of stars at the far edge of the sky. Will, who’s starting to shiver, is the one who stands up first so Hannibal obligingly follows and together they walk down the winding edge of the heath in companionable silence as their shadows lengthen and stretch out behind them in the half-light. Hannibal flags down a cab on the East Heath Road with his usual ease then stands aside to let Will climb in before him, lightly placing a protective hand on his waist when Will moves at an awkward angle and gives an involuntary wince as the stab wound flares in protest.

“That really hurt you didn’t it?” says Hannibal sympathetically. “Your face has gone white.”

“It’s fine,” replies Will firmly. Even though it’s not because the lingering pain and lack of movement are a constant source of annoyance, despite the fact his impatience for his body’s foibles always provokes a subsequent guilty twinge when he considers how *incredibly* lucky he’s been to have suffered no serious lasting damage. Will supposes in turn that a refusal to respond to pain in anything like a normal way is clearly another thing that he and Hannibal have in common – considering what they were able to achieve with respective shots to the abdomen and stab wounds to the chest and head (seriously…stabbed in the goddamn *head*) – and the thought of such a demented point of similarity makes him smile slightly. Hannibal catches the smile and raises an eyebrow, and Will hesitates for a few seconds before sliding across the seat until their shoulders are touching and then, after another shorter pause, letting his head rest lightly against Hannibal’s. Hannibal immediately makes a quiet contented sound and pulls Will a bit nearer; and Will smiles to himself again and allows his eyes to fall closed in rhythm to the soothing rocking motion of the carriage. He’s highly aware that this is the closest they’ve been since the confrontation on the riverside, yet it doesn’t feel awkward or stilted as opposed to comfortably natural; as if he’s just come back to where he was always supposed to be.

In this respect Will has been sleeping in his own bedroom for the past few weeks, a whole floor away from Hannibal’s and on the opposite side of the house. Originally it was out of necessity – the constant parade of servants, doctors and hired nurses making sharing a room completely impossible – but even now that Harley Street has returned to normal and both of them have recovered, he still hasn’t gone back. It’s not been a particularly happy interval either, and he’s extremely aware of the melancholy overtone to the whole thing: the way he’s sat on the edge of his bed for long periods, gazing into space as cups of tea and untouched

meals grow cold on their trays while knotting his fingers together and sighing and pining like a distressed heroine in some sentimental novel. The image of it has been enormously irritating because it's hardly consistent with his idea of himself, yet somehow just rolling into Hannibal's room and leaping into his bed as if nothing had happened felt equally impossible. There's also the fact that Hannibal, being more seriously injured than Will, was indisposed for much longer – forcing Will to spend even more time alone with nothing better to do than variations of brooding and sighing and knotting his fingers together – until the day that Hannibal was finally well enough to walk downstairs and Will had burst into the consulting room as soon as the doctor and nursing attendant had left (or in retrospect, more likely been banished with a withering dismissal) and announced, apropos of nothing, "I want to go back to America and I'm not going to change my mind. Would you come with me?"

Hannibal had been reclining on the sofa in a lavishly embroidered housecoat – rather pale and hollow-eyed yet still managing to look more like an illustration for *Gentleman's Quarterly* than someone convalescing from experimental surgery for a gunshot wound – and for a few seconds had looked distinctly taken aback before recovering his composure almost immediately and replying "Yes, if you like," in such a calm way that anyone would think Will had been suggesting strolling over the road to Regents Park as opposed to trekking halfway across the world. And Will, realising he didn't know what else to add now that he'd got what he asked for, had simply said "Oh. Okay then, that's good," and walked out the room again. Thinking of it now he can feel himself blushing slightly, although perhaps there are grounds not to judge himself *too* harshly for it because how could anyone possibly know how to react in such a situation? It's not like there's any precedent for it after all…he can hardly consult *Debrett's Guide to Etiquette* again. This in turn abruptly reminds him of Alana and Margot and he gives Hannibal's sleeve a sudden tug. "We need to visit Mrs Bloom and Miss Verger before we leave," he says. He realises he's grown so relaxed lying against Hannibal that it's made his voice go cloudy with contented tiredness and clears his throat to try and hide it. "They wanted to meet you."

"Of course. I'm rather curious to see them myself."

"You have to be polite," adds Will. "Nothing that could be construed as intimidating, condescending or otherwise maniacal." He smirks slightly as he remembers Margot's warning. "If you're not polite to them they'll throw pitchers at you."

"I am always *excessively* polite," replies Hannibal, beginning to wrap a strand of Will's hair round his finger. "Polite to an exemplary degree, regardless of any provocations to behave otherwise – yourself, for example, who is spectacularly provoking on every possible occasion."

Will smiles again into the darkness of the carriage where Hannibal can't see, then allows himself to be pulled even closer and stroked and caressed and generally fussed over until the driver calls the horses to a halt with a rattle of harnesses and it's time to climb out and go into the house. Purely from habit he drifts into the consulting room and kicks off his boots before collapsing onto the sofa where Hannibal joins him a few moments later. Some servant or other has lit the fire and the room has a snug, secure feel to it that encourages Will to push his legs out in front of him, stretching and flexing like a cat, before curling up again with his chin propped against his knees. He's conscious of Hannibal staring at him the entire time – frank

and unabashed without making any attempt to hide it – and rather than feeling irritated or self-conscious by it, is aware of how he's beginning to unfurl in the obvious admiration just as contentedly as he's basking in the warmth of the fire. "Come here Will," Hannibal finally says in a voice that's quiet yet insistent; and then, when Will doesn't move: "Please."

Will, who's generally allergic to being told what to do, briefly considers refusing out of stubbornness before realising that he doesn't actually want to; not least because there's something about the softly supplicating tone of the invitation that's rather irresistible. So he obligingly shifts further down the sofa until he's close enough for Hannibal to wrap both hands round his waist and tug him backwards against his chest. "Is this all right for you?" asks Hannibal softly; and it occurs to Will that he's now effectively sitting on Hannibal's knee – and that this is a profoundly ridiculous thing to be doing – but can't bring himself to care much about it one way or the other because the closeness is blissful and confirms how desperately he's missed it during all the weeks it wasn't there. So he just nods instead then lets himself grow soft and pliant, closing his eyes as the fire bathes his face with a warm buttery light that makes his pale skin look flushed and glowing.

Hannibal closes his own eyes then inhales deeply as if trying to breathe Will in, briefly tightening his grip round his chest before reaching up with one hand so he can caress the side of Will's face and brush his fingers against his lower lip. "Oh Will," he says, very low and intense. Despite the obvious sensuousness of the gesture there's still something tentative about it – as if he's gently inviting Will to respond to him – and Will finally forgets that he's supposed to be angry and opens his mouth instead so Hannibal can slowly slide his fingers inside, sucking on them almost ecstatically and giving a small moan as he feels Hannibal's other hand lightly skim downwards, lingering over the soft skin at the hollow of his throat before trailing across his ribs and along his waist. "That's it, beloved," murmurs Hannibal reverently, beginning to stroke the curve of Will's hip and relishing how perfectly the small bone fits into his palm as he curls his fingers round it. "Look at you. You're so beautiful. Do you like this? Does it feel good?" He moves his other hand slightly so he can begin to rub Will's jaw with his thumb before shifting further down and flicking open the top few buttons of his shirt and dipping his fingertips beneath the collar. "Is it enough for you or do you want more? You know you can tell me; you know I would always give you anything you wanted." Will's breath immediately speeds up and Hannibal makes a low sighing sound in return then gently kisses the back of his neck. "My darling," he says very quietly. "My beautiful boy." Will gasps again, arching his back and unconsciously spreading his legs further apart as he moves his face round so he can search out Hannibal's mouth; and who kisses him fiercely and urgently before eventually pulling away and cradling Will tightly in both arms. "Don't go back to your own room tonight," he says, and there's a strain of earnestness beneath the deadpan tone that's not usually there. "Please Will. *Mylimasis*. Stay with me instead; come back to me again."

"Oh yes," replies Will without even thinking about it. "Yes, *yes*."

"I want to touch you and hold you," murmurs Hannibal intently as he begins to kiss his way along Will's jaw. "When the sun rises I want the first thing I see to be you lying in my arms. You have no idea how much I've longed for you Will. How I've *ached* for you: aware the whole time that you were only ever a few feet away yet unable to have you with me."

“I know,” replies Will, a bit helplessly. “I know, I *know*.”

“Exquisite torture,” says Hannibal; then actually hisses out what is quite clearly a fearsome-sounding curse, albeit in an unrecognisable language, at a sudden loud knock on the door.

“Oh balls,” says Will, who doesn’t have the same restraint.

Hannibal makes another hissing noise, then kisses Will’s temple and tenderly gathers him up and deposits him on the sofa before striding over to open the door, where Will can hear him snapping “What is it Mary?” in an unusually irritable way.

“Terribly sorry to disturb you sir,” replies Mary, faltering slightly when she sees the expression on his face, “but I’m afraid Dr Rackham has arrived.” At which point Hannibal repeats the hissing noise, and Will fights an urge to laugh at the sound of it, and Mary tuts sympathetically before adding: “Did you forget he was coming sir? That’s not like you.”

“Indeed I did,” replies Hannibal briskly. “Although it’s a little late to do anything about it now. My apologies Mary; be so good as to show him to the dining room would you? I’ll join him in a moment – please tell him I’m very sorry for the delay. Although I am not,” he adds once the door’s closed again. “I am not sorry at *all*.”

“Who is he?” asks Will, irritable now himself at an intrusion that’s as unexpected as it’s profoundly unwanted. Getting to his feet he crossly refastens his shirt just as Hannibal walks up behind him and begins to tidy his hair back into place.

“He’s taking over the practice when I leave.”

“Oh,” says Will, leaning into the touch as Hannibal’s long fingers skim through his hair. “How…boring.”

“Indeed. I did mention it to you, although I can hardly blame you for forgetting considering I’ve clearly paid no attention to it myself. Do you want to join us? You’d be very welcome. Not that there’s any real need, of course, because I shall still track you down again as soon as he’s left – depend upon it.”

Will actually finds the idea of a stilted formal dinner to be rather insufferable; but considering that letting Hannibal out of his sight for any length of time feels completely impossible he opens his mouth to say ‘I’ll come’ before getting self-conscious at the inescapable double meaning and just nodding instead. Hannibal, in turn, gives him a look that’s so incredibly amatory and suggestive it should be labelled with an age-restriction warning before tugging Will close for a final kiss then reluctantly letting him go and heading off towards the dining room; and where Dr Rackham is patiently waiting whilst casing the premises with the obvious eagerness of soon being in possession of them himself. He strikes Will as rather annoying on the grounds of being excessively voluble and gossipy, although still gets something of a free pass for his obvious intelligence and friendly unassuming manner. He’s also evidently bursting to discuss Dr Chilton’s newfound notoriety as the Camden Ripper, and before the servants have even entered with the first course has already thrown social restraint to the wind and brought it up on five separate occasions.

"*Shocking*," concludes Dr Rackham with obvious glee. "Simply shocking. Mind you, my dear wife always thought there was something unsavoury about him. Mrs Rackham is a perfect seer when it comes to people's characters."

"Her insight has plainly not failed her on this occasion," replies Hannibal with his most blankly serene stare. "And it's extremely fortunate that the police finally came round to her way of thinking. Otherwise there's no saying how much longer he would have been free to commit his crimes."

Will stretches forward a little so he can brush his feet against Hannibal's beneath the table. "Of course Dr Chilton's very adamant that he's innocent," he says casually. "Which would mean that whoever's *really* responsible is still free."

Hannibal gives the faintest hint of a smirk and returns the pressure against Will's foot. "Guilt and innocence are such fixed concepts," he says, lightly tipping his wine glass as if proposing a toast. "And yet see how morality itself is always relative."

Will nods in response before subtly inclining his own glass in Hannibal's direction. "Of course," he adds, "and therefore separates matters of fact from matters of value." Hannibal's Sphinx-like smile grows even broader. "No single perspective is ever the whole truth after all."

"I always thought he was insufferable," says Dr Rackham, cheerfully forking up salad.

Hannibal doesn't answer but instead casts Will a long intense stare; and Will catches his eye again then finds it impossible to look away, ultimately returning the gaze with such intensity he's half surprised that the length of table separating them doesn't begin to smoulder. "And off to America I hear?" adds Dr Rackham, oblivious to the tension and having obviously decided that the subject of Dr Chilton has finally been exhausted. "I envy you there; I'd love to see it myself but the furthest I've ever managed is France. Of course I was a younger man then." He pauses and complacently runs his fingers through his greying hair as if he and it are privately congratulating themselves for having endured intact for so long. "I suppose you're going yourself Mr Graham? Back home for you is it?"

Will reluctantly realises that some kind of response is now required so forces himself to stop staring at Hannibal and agrees that this is the case. "To Virginia, most likely," he adds. "Fairfax County – I lived there a few years ago and I'd like to go back."

Dr Rackham nods enthusiastically and offers a few meandering remarks about the Civil War, which Will half-heartedly pretends to be interested in despite not listening to a single word, before adding "They say the countryside around those parts is very fine. Dramatic and that sort of thing."

"Yes," replies Will, much more sincerely this time. "Some of it's extremely beautiful."

"You have that estuary region don't you – what do you call it? The one with the Native-sounding name."

"The Chesapeake Bay."

“That’s the one. How are you going to like that Dr Lecter? Out in the Americas – quite a different prospect from London.”

“I’m sure I shall like it exceedingly,” replies Hannibal who’s still staring at Will.

“Well there’s no doubt they’ll be very glad to have you,” says Dr Rackham in a respectful tone. “One need only consider your reputation here. You’re leaving me with quite a legacy to live up to, I don’t mind saying so.”

Hannibal inclines his head at Dr Rackham with a modest nod before the dark eyes slowly swivel back to Will again as he adds: “I shall have to do my best to establish a new reputation won’t I?”

“Rather an alarming prospect, beginning all over again in a new country,” muses Dr Rackham. “I wouldn’t have the nerve for it myself. Although at least you won’t be going alone, will you Dr Lecter? You’ll have this young fellow to show you where everything is.”

“I shall depend upon it,” adds Hannibal with a rather macabre smile, at the exact moment that Will says: “Oh yes – definitely.”

“Well isn’t that splendid?” says Dr Rackham, folding up his napkin and beaming at them both in a benevolent way. “I wish the two of you the very best of luck.” Then he takes a contented swig of his wine, completely oblivious to how Will is mentally telegraphing at him to kindly fuck off back to his own house while Hannibal is irritably twitching a steak knife between his thumb and forefinger as if fantasising about the best angle to thrust it into Dr Rackham’s relentlessly prattling head. As it is he takes an excessive amount of time in leaving: first insisting on shaking Hannibal’s hand with unnecessary vigour, then Will’s, then asking to speak to Mary to arrange a time to view the house properly, then getting as far as the hallway before realising he’s mislaid his gloves (and going back to retrieve them), then forgetting where he’s put his pocket watch (and upending the entire area around the dining table looking for it) – and by which time Will is nearly hysterical with frustrated irritation and Hannibal is gazing at the knife with an expression of genuine wistfulness on his face before Mary comes back again to reunite Dr Rackham with his assorted belongings before politely yet firmly bundling him out of the house and into a waiting hansom cab.

“Will you be needing anything else sir?” says Mary once she’s closed the door again.

“Yes, rather badly” replies Hannibal, who’s half-concealed in the shadows so she can’t see the way he’s staring fixedly at Will. “But it’s nothing you need be concerned with. You may go now Mary – thank you for disposing of Dr Rackham so effectively.”

“Well in that case I’ll see you tomorrow sir; and you too sir. Wishing you both a very good night.”

“I anticipate that myself,” says Hannibal, so completely deadpan that Mary remains innocently unaware of any double meaning and merely curtseys politely before vanishing down the corridor; whereupon Hannibal takes a quick step forward only to be promptly pounced on by Will who’s managed to move even faster. Then for a few seconds there’s nothing but a tangle of limbs as they desperately rock against each other, mouths crashing

together in a feverish melee of teeth and hot breath, until Will eventually pulls free long enough to gasp out “I missed you: I missed you so much.” Everything feels kinetic now, sparking and snapping as if his body can barely sustain the force of it, and Hannibal makes a noise that’s close to growling before roughly pushing Will up against the wall, stabbing his tongue into his mouth and tearing at his shirt until Will wrenches himself free again and pinions Hannibal’s arms behind his back, forcing him round so he can scape his teeth against his neck.

“Oh God,” gasps Will, thrashing his head almost feverishly as it gets hard to breathe with the heady exhilaration of it all. “*God*, Hannibal. I need this. I need *you.*” On the surface it sounds like nothing more than distilled desire – just an extension of the way he’s grinding his body against Hannibal’s as if it’ll never be possible to get close enough – but in spite of the raw physicality Will knows before he’s even uttered the words that he’s not just talking about tonight. Just as he understands, without being told, that when Hannibal turns round and murmurs “I know, beloved, I need you too,” that he’s referring to something far more meaningful than the few fleeting hours that lie ahead. For the length of several heartbeats everything then goes still and Hannibal’s eyes, gleaming in the shadows like a cat’s, briefly soften as he suddenly grows gentle once more, stroking Will’s face and kissing his forehead while the mutual yearning is exchanged and acknowledged. Then the moment has passed and the restraint is gone, and he’s hungrily pillaging Will’s mouth again and tugging his head back by the hair while Will is scratching Hannibal’s shoulders with his fingernails and snarling “For Christ’s sake what’s the matter with you, what are you waiting for? Take me upstairs *right now* and fuck me.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply immediately; just breathes heavily for a few seconds then pulls Will’s head even further back so he can cover his throat with a series of bruising biting kisses before gathering him into his arms and lifting him off the ground entirely, tilting his own body slightly forwards to allow Will to wrap his legs around his back and give him something to grind his hips against. Will moans helplessly at the sensation and then buries his face against Hannibal’s neck to try and stifle the sound before frantically searching out his mouth again. The short distance to the bedroom now feels agonisingly far and before they’re even fully inside he’s twisting himself free so he can kick the door closed behind them and attack Hannibal’s clothes almost violently whilst dragging him back towards the bed until they both lose their balance at the same time and collapse across the covers in a welter of panting, helpless desire. In doing so Will can’t escape the sense that this is a reunion of sorts and should rightfully be tender and yearning and spun out across several patient hours; yet right now his need to belong to one another again is like a physical ache in his body and makes him snarl with impatience at even a hint of delay. And Hannibal seems likewise incapable of getting himself under any kind of control either as he turns round and sweeps aside a pile of books with a hiss of irritation, clearly oblivious to the way they crash loudly to the floor, until he’s located a small glass bottle on the bedside table that he uses to drench his fingers in an oily, strong-smelling liquid before forcing Will’s legs apart and pushing one, then two, deep inside him with a roughness that’s borne from a sheer inability to wait. Will clenches round him rather beautifully and Hannibal sighs with pleasure and murmurs “Good boy” at the way he’s whining and rocking his hips against Hannibal’s hand, desperate to get the pressure as deep as possible. “*So* beautiful,” says Hannibal rapturously. “Perfect.” Reaching up he pushes Will’s damp hair out his eyes, then keeps his palm pressed against his forehead so he can't

move his face away. “Look at me Will; keep your eyes open. I want to watch you while I’m doing this.”

Will writhes helplessly against the pillow and spreads his leg wider apart, breathy and wanton as he feels the flush of wetness where the pre-come is already pooling onto his stomach. Normally he likes this; *loves* it in fact – could happily spend hours on his back with Hannibal’s fingers buried deep inside him, quivering exquisitely on the brink the entire time while gripping onto Hannibal’s free hand with one of his own as his breath comes quick and uneven and he nearly sobs with the pleasure of it. But right now it’s not what he needs and he reaches out and seizes hold of Hannibal’s wrist with something like desperation. “I’m ready,” he manages to say between gasps. “Please. I need…That’s enough.”

“It is not, be patient.” Hannibal’s long fingers begin to move even faster and more insistently, crooking and pressing upwards, and Will moans again and flings his arm over his face. “It’s been so long since I’ve had you like this. You’re very tight; I don’t want to hurt you.”

For a few seconds Will goes quiet in between the panting and then simply shakes his head. What he wants to say is: ‘*You won't because I won't let you. And anyway, I trust you now*’ – but once again he knows the statement would be referring to far, far more than just their current circumstances and he’s reluctant to ruin the moment by dwelling on something so poignant and profound. So he just draws in a few more shuddering breaths then tugs himself free instead, grabbing Hannibal by the shoulders as he does so and forcing him down onto the bed so he can climb on top of him.

Hannibal gasps slightly at the suddenness of it then smiles affectionately and takes hold of Will’s waist, relishing how delicate it feels compared to the strong, firm muscles in his abdomen and the endless expanse of creamy pale skin. “What a little tyrant you are,” he says.

“What a pushover *you* are.” Taking care to avoid the bullet wound, Will leans down and gives Hannibal’s ear a gentle tug with his teeth. “Not as tough as you like to think, are you?”

“Obviously not; you have brought me down. Consider me suitably humbled.”

“To the victor, the spoils,” says Will, which makes Hannibal laugh before reaching out so he can stroke Will’s face then smooth away his hair from where it’s tangling into his eyes for a second time. Then he falls completely silent and simply stares at Will with a very intense expression; and Will reaches out himself so he can take hold of Hannibal’s hand, entwining their fingers together as he gazes down at Hannibal, gazing up at him. Hannibal’s eyes are very bright, almost glistening, and in that moment Will’s breath hitches as he’s overcome with a renewed sense that Hannibal is really seeing him: stripping back the layers and artifice and really *seeing* Will for everything that he is – everything that’s flawed and fatal and damaged – as if it’s endlessly artful and fascinating. As if it’s something beautiful: Hannibal’s life endeavour, his masterpiece…a work of art. There’s another beat of silence and Will murmurs his name but he still doesn’t respond, just carries on gazing with lips that are very slightly parted; and it’s then that Will knows, with a fierce surge of clarity, that right now he’s *everything* to Hannibal. Right now he’s his whole world. In that one look he’s cut out his heart and put it in Will’s hands.

And Hannibal simply stares back, content to be seen as vulnerable in the force of his devotion and making no attempt to conceal it. “Will,” he finally says, very soft and intense. “*Mano meilė*. Beloved.” Hooking both hands round Will’s shoulders he pulls him forward so he can kiss him, tenderly and sincerely and on and on and on, before skimming his palms down the long curve of Will’s spine and taking hold of his waist so he can lift him up then gently lower him down. And Will quivers, tenses then cries out as he feels Hannibal’s cock pushing into the tight, slippery heat of his body – pushing in *deep* – and so thick and hard and perfect, filling him up in a way he could never have imagined he needed. “*Oh*,” he gasps, and for a few seconds his voice sounds perilously close to breaking. His eyelashes are so wet… surely there can’t be tears there? “Oh yes, *yes*, oh God.”

Hannibal gasps too then repeats Will’s name again, low and intense as if it’s the words of a prayer. “I believe I could stay with you like this forever,” he adds softly and Will moans in agreement; desperately rocking downwards at the same time as Hannibal pushes up, giving it to Will in rhythmic powerful thrusts that he can really feel. Hannibal’s hands seem to be touching him everywhere now and Will’s whole body is trembling as he rolls his hips and arches his back, lithe and graceful in the ecstasy of it, and gasping out a sound that’s nearly a wail. Their damp skin is sliding together and Will’s almost achingly hard as he feels himself tightening around Hannibal’s cock, and oh *God* he’s going to come, he knows he is – he can’t possibly last much longer – yet the intensity of it is overwhelming him from an entirely different reason and he can’t stop himself from abruptly going still before sinking forwards again so he can hide his face against Hannibal’s neck. “What’s the matter my love?” murmurs Hannibal. “What do you need?” His breath feels so soft on Will’s skin: tender heat and humidity as he brushes his lips across Will’s temple before grasping hold of his hips and slowly rocking them back and forward with his hands until Will is starting to quiver and make small mewling noises. “You take it so beautifully. Are you tired? Do you want me to help you?”

But Will just shakes his head and screws his eyes tighter closed because something’s still missing, and while it’s good – it’s more than good – things won’t be *perfect* until he finds what it is. Then he goes still again as the trembling finally stops and he pulls back slightly so he can gently press their foreheads together. Because it’s easy now, it’s *so* easy, of course it is; why did it feel difficult before? “I love you,” murmurs Will, soft and intense. “I love you so much.” In fact once he’s started saying it he can’t seem to stop, and keeps repeating it over and over as if it’s a chant or a mantra or an article of faith – *I love you, I love you, I love you* – but then it doesn’t really matter if he can’t stop, and no real reason to either, because Hannibal so clearly wants to hear it and is pulling him even closer and kissing every bit of skin he can reach: “More than I ever thought possible Will,” he’s saying. “More than sense or reason. More than I have words to tell you.”

I’m giving you the biggest thing I have to offer anyone, thinks Will rather wildly. *Myself; and you’re repaying me in kind*. My Self and Your Self…one self in exchange for another. Because they’re both just material beings after all – easily tattered and rended and difficult to patch back together – but just as they were ready to die for each other, Will understands that they’re finally ready to live for each other as well. Not that he knows how to say it: the sentiment itself is beyond words, but perhaps one day he’ll find the right ones. Perhaps they both will. But there’s no rush and no need to worry, because now they’ve finally got the time

to discover what the best ones are; now they've got all the time they need…now they've got forever.

*****

The remainder of the evening passes in a blissful haze of making love punctuated by bouts of rest, a long languorous bath, then finally creeping into the kitchen to forage for food (upon which Will stubs his toe in the darkness and says "Shit" very loudly, then gets an impromptu and uncharacteristic fit of giggles as Mary's voice immediately drifts out from next room with "Is that you Mr Graham? Are you *all right* sir?") before finally falling asleep in each other's arms in the early hours of the morning with their legs tangled together. Will's so sated and blissful that he rests extremely deeply and peacefully to begin with, only to abruptly wake up around 3am and be badly disorientated to find himself in what initially seems like an unfamiliar room. This is followed by a few panicked seconds where he can't understand why someone is holding onto him before slowly growing more aware of his surroundings and realising that Hannibal's arm, tightly wrapped around his waist, feels strained and tense and that his mouth is moving against the back of Will's neck as he murmurs something in his sleep. The words themselves are indecipherable, yet while the harsh vowel sounds indicate they're not being spoken in English it's the tone that Will notices more than anything else; a rather unsettling blend of urgency and melancholy that's a world away from the customary persona of coolly commanding authority. As a veteran of disturbed nights himself he knows a nightmare when he sees one and with some effort he disentangles himself from Hannibal's rigid grip so he can turn round and lay a kiss on his forehead.

"It's all right," he says very quietly, even though he knows Hannibal can't hear him. "I've got you."

Compared to Will's own thrashing night terrors Hannibal appears remarkably still and restrained – almost eerily so – although it's obvious his dreams are troubling him from the rigid line of his jaw and the frantic way his eyelids are flickering as if his gaze is fixed on something unbearable. Seeing him like this, Will can't help remembering the numerous hints he's received about Hannibal having experienced great loss and despair in his life and he wonders where it is exactly that Hannibal has gone right now: whether he's still himself, or someone else, or even if he's currently decades away, burdened with all the weight of a child's helplessness against arbitrary adult cruelty. His face is bathed silver in the moonlight with stark shadows painted across the nose and cheekbones and Will gazes at him for a few moments in quiet devotion before taking hold of both his hands and stroking them with his own. And it seems to have a soothing effect so he does it again, murmuring words of reassurance and pledges of love that feel no less ardent or sincere for having only a sleeping audience to hear them. Hannibal's expression slowly grows less tense and Will stops speaking and leans forward to brush his lips across his forehead again before lying back on the pillow, determined to watch over him for as long as required.

You can't take me over because I'm my own person, he thinks now as he gently runs his fingers through Hannibal's hair, *but I'd still give you everything I have*. *You can't control me because I'm independent and free, but there's still virtually nothing I wouldn't do for you*. Will/won't, can/can't – it's such a paradox. *They're* such a paradox. Yet here they are

regardless: like two vast stars that have collided and in that fiery, exhilarating point of contact become greater than their divided selves.

Hannibal shifts in his sleep once more and Will makes another soothing sound then rubs his hands until he settles again. It feels so different like this, which means the insights are different too: infinitely softer and calmer than the blood-soaked revelations by the riverside, or even from the ecstasy of a lover's intimacy and the attendant loss of control. Just the two of them in the darkness, myself and yourself*,* separate consciousness and dissenting souls; yet still so entirely and perfectly together. *Look at you*, he thinks quietly. *You, you, you*. *Who are you, really?*

You're everything.

And it's true, because Hannibal has been so many things. This lover and adversary, this human hall of mirrors: phantom, demon, fallen idol, faithless friend, malign energy tempered by thoughtful smiles, hauntingly dreamlike yet with a snapping intellect and haughty pragmatism, tender touches that wounded without warning, lethal in construction and destructive by design, broken promises and earnest endeavours, inventive in temperament and inspirational in execution – both problem *and* solution – completely, utterly and unrepentantly deficient in all morals, ignoring all maxims…yet with an intense, unbridled virtuosity that burnt so brightly it sometimes hurts to look at him. In a deeply unfathomable way, everything is just *better* with Hannibal. *Will* is better: lives larger, thinks sharper, runs faster, loves fiercer and *is* more loved. It's both as simple and as convoluted as that. Because he might not have made Will a better person but he's inspired him to become a better version of himself; and while he hasn't made Will feel the best, or happiest, or safest he's still made him feel the *most.* He's understood Will in a way that no one else ever has, and Will never knew himself as well as he does when they're together.

You did all that, thinks Will, gently running the tip of his finger across Hannibal's cheekbone. *And I understand it now because once the mystery and spectacle is stripped away, it's just you behind it all. Just you – and now me*.

*****

Will wakes early the next day to find Hannibal sitting up in bed, straight-backed and imposing as ever, and leafing through a newspaper with one hand while stroking Will's hair with the other. The sun is streaming through the open window and he can hear the servants bustling around the business of their morning tasks while an organ grinder begins to crank out a jaunty little refrain in the street below. It's all so reassuringly safe and dependable: last night's ghosts are banished now.

"Morning," says Will, rather blearily.

"Good morning."

Will tries and fails to think of something to add and ultimately only manages a rather undignified grunting noise instead. Hannibal narrows his eyes, clearly waiting for some sort of elaboration. "So tired," says Will.

“Then go back to sleep,” replies Hannibal fondly. “You don’t have anywhere to be.”

“No, but I’ve things to do. There’s still so much to get organised.” He scrubs his hand over his face then pauses and peers hopefully at the plate on the bedside table. “Is that an orange you’ve got there?”

“It is,” says Hannibal, obligingly moving out the way so Will can lean over him and steal a few segments. “Why do you sound so awed; surely you must have had one before?”

“Yes but not for ages, they’re so expensive. Fruit is generally”

“In London, certainly; although I would have thought it was easier to come by in America. You’ve never had scurvy have you? May I see your teeth?”

“No I haven’t,” says Will, wriggling out the way. “And no you may not. Are you done with that newspaper?” Hannibal passes it over and Will flicks through it, eagerly at first and then with growing disinterest – not least because his old nemesis, the British Empire, seems to be featured far more prominently than usual – before finally casting it to one side and vanishing under the bedclothes again because he’s decided that inspecting Hannibal at close quarters is far more interesting than plodding through *The London Times*. Hannibal smiles to himself then rests his arms behind his head and patiently lies still as slim, inquisitive fingers begin prodding up and down his abdomen. “How did you get this scar?” says Will a few moments later.

“I beg your pardon? Your voice is very muffled beneath all your layers.”

“This scar,” bellows Will.

“Oh. Which one?”

“On your ribs.”

“It’s rather a long story; not a particularly interesting one either, considering it was merely the result of an accident. Suffice to say the person responsible still had cause to regret it.”

“Why?”

“Because he is dead,” says Hannibal, sounding extremely cheerful. Will makes an amused noise and Hannibal locates his hand beneath the bedclothes and rubs it between both his own. “Go to sleep *mylimasis.* You clearly need some rest; you’ve earned it after all. And what is so pressing that you need to do it immediately?”

The top of Will’s hair, which is the only part of him currently visible, begins to move from side to side. “I have to write to the letting agent.”

“It can wait another day, surely.”

“I guess so,” says Will, abruptly remerging. “Although the sooner it gets sorted the better.”

“True.”

“I want to live in the countryside,” adds Will, rather dreamily. “Somewhere deserted with no people.” Briefly he remembers his lonely pilgrimage back from Harley Street the night the ostler was murdered – tramping through London in the early hours consumed with hopeless wistfulness at the idea of his own home – and feels absurdly happy at the idea that it’s finally going to happen. “And dogs. Lots and lots of dogs.”

“It sounds *charming*,” says Hannibal drily.

“I suppose you want a townhouse that you can waft around and be pretentious in,” replies Will, burying his way beneath Hannibal’s arm. “That’s okay, there’s no reason we can’t have separate places. In fact we’d probably kill each other if we lived together all the time.”

“I shall need something of that kind, certainly. Where else can I see my patients?”

“Knowing you you’ll see them in a basement.”

“Oh yes, very good. What a comedian you are. Nevertheless when I’m not being pretentious in my basement, I intend to be with you as often as possible.”

“I suppose I could let you,” says Will, leaning over to steal another piece of the orange. “I could live with you in the city during the week and you can be pretentious in my farmhouse at weekends.” He grins to himself then wriggles further down the bed to curl up against Hannibal’s chest before emerging a few moments later muttering something uncomplimentary about collar bones and spanners. Hannibal smirks and affectionately runs his fingers through Will’s hair before reaching over to rifle in the stack of books by the bed to find a means to occupy himself and avoid getting up and disturbing Will in the event of him falling asleep.

“Sherlock Holmes,” says Will, catching sight of the title. “I don’t know why you read those. They’re so contrived.”

“Not at all, they are rather diverting in their own way. And look here, do you remember – the one with the mongoose.”

“Oh yes,” says Will with heavy sarcasm. “Delightful. That’s another condition by the way: don’t manipulate me, don’t lie to me, and most of all don’t call me a mongoose.”

“Why not? I told you before, they are to be admired as impressively adept destroyers of snakes.” The faint half-smile briefly reappears. “Murderers with grace and purpose”

“And I told *you* that they look like weasels.”

“Indeed you did.”

“So you’re basically saying that I remind you of a murder weasel?”

“But an incredibly attractive one,” replies Hannibal, completely deadpan. “Adorable, one might say.”

Will gives a long-suffering sigh and is contemplating disappearing beneath the covers for a third time (while gloomily reflecting on the fact he's just been likened to an adorable murder weasel) when Hannibal leans down and kisses the tip of his nose and he can't help laughing and wrapping his arms round his back instead, clinging on as tightly as possible. "Oh God," he mutters into Hannibal's shoulder. "I'm completely mad – I must be. And you're even worse. What's going to happen to us?"

"Something extraordinary," replies Hannibal with a smile. He carefully disentangles himself and then reaches over into the drawer of the bedside table, making an apologetic noise as Will has to manoeuvre out the way to make room for him. "Forgive me," adds Hannibal. "I promise I shall stop disturbing you after this and allow you to sleep, but beforehand there's something I want you to have."

"Oh yes?" asks Will with interest.

"Indeed yes; the truth is that I've been intending to give it to you for some time and am too impatient to wait any longer."

"But – but that's my ring," says Will in confusion when he sees the familiar box. "Why are you giving it back to me?" And then, in a more doleful voice: "Don't you want it?"

"Do not mistake me *mylimasis*," replies Hannibal gently. "I am not returning it as such, rather asking you to look after it on my behalf. You see I'm afraid that your prediction was correct and it's somewhat too small. For me that is. You however, my beloved…*you* I believe it would fit very well." As Will gazes back, rather pale and wide-eyed, Hannibal leans forward to brush their lips together before pulling away so he can cup Will's face instead. "We understand each other now Will," he adds in an even softer voice. "Finally – we understand. Which is why I want to ask if you would perhaps consider wearing it *for* me?" Then kissing Will's palm he takes hold of the ring and begins to slide it – very slowly and earnestly so there can be no doubting the symbolism of the gesture – onto the fourth finger of Will's left hand.

Outside in the corridor Mary, bearing a serving tray weighed down with a kettle and two cups, raises her arm to knock on the door before hesitating and slowly lowering it again. She can hear Will's voice saying "Oh yes! Yes *please*," and the sound of it makes her smile because if it weren't for the American accent she would barely have recognised it as his; more happy and animated than she's ever heard before. Suspecting that she won't receive an answer any time soon, she gives another smile then places the teacups outside the door and silently tiptoes away.

Chapter End Notes

OMFG THIS BASTARD THING IS FINALLY FINISHED!

This is the second time I've ended a fic with a rambling message, but they've both had such gorgeous readers that it's impossible to stop myself gushing over you all. As you'll have guessed from my repeated whining in the author notes this fic was very tricky to do. It's my second attempt at creative writing and I dug myself a massive hole from the start by being ridiculously over-ambitious with the scope of it; and of course the internet's not always the best place to learn a new skill because the Angry Anons rocked up at the end of last year and insisted on waving their anonymous hate boners at me week after week. I've never had to moderate comments before and it totally sucked, and what powered me through – and made the writing fun again! – were Fannibals stopping by to tell me that they were enjoying it and looking forward to knowing what happened next. I totally understand preferring not to a click on a story until it's complete, especially if it takes as many months to finish as this one did, so HUGE thanks to the readers who took a chance on a meandering WiP and showed their support with feedback/kudos and to the talented artists who shared their beautiful, compelling work. You are all amazing and it would have been impossible to have asked for kinder or more generous sponsors for Sassy Victorian Will and The Sad Orphan Bullshit Face.

Well, no more sprawling historical AUs for me! I bet I'm back again before too long though (seeing as The Hannigram is more addictive than crack), so please do subscribe to my profile if you'd like to keep in touch. You probably know the drill by now: Mega Sassy Will and Mongoose Besotted Hannibal who can't say one simple word when 20 elaborate ones and a metaphor can be used instead.

Hannigramtastic hugs and thanks in the meantime and cups of tea all round!

MissDis x

ETA. June 2017

This was a bit too spoilery to include in the notes at the beginning, but thanks to the wonderful Cherry (who of course did the equally adorable drawing of waltzing Hannigram for chapter 19) there's now a super-cute sketch of domestic bliss in America ;-D

Works inspired by this one

To Hell and Back by a_small_potato

[Restricted Work] by AtticusCrete

'This Dangerous Game' Cover Art by CrazyInL0v3

"This Dangerous Game" Cover by marlahanni

"I Want You To Tell People About Me" (fanart for This Dangerous Game) by tictactoes

Drafts by nnovas

PODFIC of: This Dangerous Game By MissDisoriental by Aleandri

Cover Art for "This Dangerous Game" by MissDisoriental by Petriey

The Sassy Will Gallery by MrsSteampunk

Playlist for This Dangerous Game by creativelivings

危险游戏 by chansang, lzskwzl, spacemonkey42

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!